CAN AN EXTREME DETOX REALLY WORK?

Hollywood's latest detox promises to leave you seven pounds lighter in seven days. But what's it like to live on just lemon juice, maple syrup and water? Helen Gent finds out

So here's a question: would I like to lose loads of weight in way little time? You bet. Get glowing skin and glossy hair? Bring it on. Would I mind not eating for a week? Now wait a second... Wouldn't you know it? Like anything that promises parting of the sea-style miracles, there's always a catch. And the Lemon Detox Diet – also known as the Lemonade Diet or the Master Cleanse – has a great big one. You can look and feel great in a week, but you really, honestly, most definitely – no cheating at the back there – cannot eat a single thing for seven days (some people even do it for 10).

But despite its obvious drawbacks, this extreme fast – invented over 30 years ago by naturopath Stanley Burroughs – has become the word-of-mouth detox of the moment. And with its fast-track weight loss and red-carpet glow practically guaranteed, Hollywood can't get enough. Courtney Love, Mick Jagger and Madonna are among those rumoured to rely on the cleanse.

The diet even has its own Yahoo group, devoted websites, blogs and message boards where fasters swap advice, encouragement and tales of miracles. A hundred thousand people do the fast each year in a bid to give their body a break from toxins and feel lighter and brighter in return. And, although he doesn't endorse it, Ian Murphy, a doctor based at St Mary's Hospital in London, says it can be healthy to challenge the body in this way. However, he wouldn't recommend the detox to anyone with a weak constitution. OK, then, how hard can it be?

And so it comes to pass that, despite being a deep-fried, double-choc-chipped, heavy-on-the-mayo kind of gal, for one whole week I survive on a cocktail of natural maple and palm syrup (the basis of the detox, and formulated to provide you with a balance of vitamins, minerals and energy during your fast), lemon juice (a well-known internal cleanser) and water, with a shot of cayenne pepper (said to speed up the metabolism). The taste didn't float my boat – and it looks like wee – but apparently this heady brew would stave off hunger and detox my body like it had never been detoxed before.

It's a strange thing not eating. Lunch time. Dinner time. All those culinary milestones in your day just disappear. Which just gives you more time to do stuff. Like think about food. Forget about watching TV to take your mind off munching. How many food ads can those people cram into a three-minute break? Just as well that by day three, surprisingly, I wasn't actually giving food much thought (if you don't count the time I nearly ate my apricot face scrub). And would you Häagen-Dazs it, I really didn't feel hungry. There was the occasional rumble of protest from my (now shrinking) stomach, but a hit of the special brew saw that off. And despite warnings that I could get headaches, nausea and spots, there were no *Exorcist*-style nasties. Were my toxins too shy to come out? No, they were all heading for my tongue, which spent the week covered in a thick white coating. Thank heavens for the peppermint tea I was allowed (you can also drink laxative tea, if your bowels need a push).

The trickiest part was the fatigue. I spent most of the week feeling lacklustre and listless, and my brain felt like it was on permanent go-slow, though I'm reliably informed that others have managed to do great work then nigh-on skip to their exercise class while on the Lemon Detox.

The best thing for me was the weight loss. Each day on the scales brought new joy as the pounds dropped off. If it hadn't been for this, I'd probably have thrown myself into the fridge. But I didn't and I made it. Was it worth it? You bet. Am I proud of myself? Yes, indeedy. Would I do it again? I'll get back to you...

Post-detox, my eyes look clear, my skin peachier and I've lost half a stone – a pound a day! Something strange has also happened – I'm craving healthy food. Fasting for a week made me see just how much I stuff into my body without needing to. Who knows if the weight will pile back – I'm only four days on – but my healthy habits are on track. And I'll dine out for weeks on the 'I went for a week without food' thing. *A one-litre tin of Madal Bal Natural Tree Syrup (which should last a week) costs £39.99; ring 0845 370 1012; www.lemondetox.com*

80% OF WOMEN IN THEIR TWENTIES WORRY ABOUT THEIR WEIGHT EVERY DAY AND ONE-THIRD ARE ALWAYS ON A DIET

WITH ITS FAST-TRACK WEIGHT LOSS AND RED-CARPET GLOW PRACTICALLY GUARANTEED, HOLLYWOOD CAN'T GET ENOUGH OF THE LEMON DETOX

THE VERDICT

GIVING YOUR BODY A BREAK FROM WELL, EVERYTHING LEAVES IT LIGHTER, TIGHTER AND FEELING CLEANSED. BUT GOING WITHOUT FOOD FOR A WEEK IS TOUGH. USE THIS DETOX TO KICKSTART HEALTHY HABITS AND REDISCOVER YOUR WILLPOWER – YOU'LL FEEL REALLY STRONG AFTER IT

RATING ★★★★☆

FIVE DETOXES

(THAT DON'T INVOLVE STARVING)

READ *The Great American Detox Diet* by Alex Jamieson (Rodale International, £10.99). Alex shot to fame when her boyfriend Morgan Spurlock made his documentary *Super Size Me*. It was her sound principles and great recipes that got him back into shape in eight weeks.

GO on a detox holiday to the Mainhos Vethos resort in Spain. Relax in beautiful surroundings while someone else does all the hard work (read: making delicious, organic meals and organising your yoga classes) for you. Our tester lost 10 pounds in 10 days. Ring (00 351 282) 68 71 47; www.mainhos-vethos.com

TRY a weekend detox. Look thinner by Monday by doing what models do before a shoot: lay off the carbs. For glowing skin, have herbal teas, water, fruit, veg and oily fish. And try a detox bath – with fresh, chopped ginger, a cup of Epsom salts and a slug of sesame oil.

BOOK a colonic irrigation. Our tester felt slimmer and clearer-skinned after just one session. Ring 0845 890 0833.

CHEAT with a luxurious detox treatment such as Bliss Spa's Deep Sea Detox – a toxin-targeting massage and seaweed wrap that promises to slim, remineralise and hydrate you. Ring (020) 7584 3888.