Are Epsom salts a safe laxative? [1]

Dear Alice,

A friend and I were talking and she mentioned that she’d used epsom salts once after a particularly extravagant post-Thanksgiving food binge to "clear out her system". I've been experiencing a lot of gastrointestinal distress lately due to a change in diet, and I've been thinking about trying a cleanse of some sort to sort of "reset" things. Would a colon cleanse or laxative be safe for me? Are epsom salts a good option?

Answer

Dear Reader,

To get this conversation moving, it's time to talk about your tummy troubles. While a colon cleanse or laxative may help move waste through your body, there may be strategies that pose fewer health risks and are more supportive of long term gastrointestinal health (more on that in a bit). Additionally, both of these methods can come with some serious side effects. Magnesium sulfate, commonly known as Epsom salts can be used every once in a while to ease constipation (fewer than two bowel movements per week, or no bowel movement for three days) by increasing water in the intestinal tract, which promotes the easier passage of stool. If constipation is the reason for your gastrointestinal distress, Epsom salts may be a good option. Colon cleanses, on the other hand, don't have enough evidence to support that they'll improve any health conditions. In general, talking with a health professional before using Epsom salts and other laxatives is usually a good idea. However, you mentioned a change in your diet might be the reason for this gastrointestinal distress so going back to your original diet may also help. Want to know more about getting back on track? Keep reading!
While it can be used for occasional constipation, purposes such as detoxing, weight loss, or to clear out the body after a long period of eating don't fall under Epsom salt's intended uses. Overuse of this product may cause serious side effects [2] (such as dizziness, irregular heartbeat, or muscle weakness) or interact negatively with other medications, such as antibiotics. Using too high of a dosage of Epsom salts may also be risky, so adherence to instructions from your health care provider or the package is key. When taken as directed, it can help lead to a bowel movement within 30 minutes to six hours. For reference, you may want to be especially careful using laxatives if you're:

- Experiencing extreme stomach pain, vomiting, or nausea
- Experiencing bowel movements that have been different for two weeks or longer
- Adhering to a low magnesium diet
- Using laxatives for a week or more
- Pregnant or nursing as they may harm unborn or breastfeeding children

List adapted from Mayo Clinic [3].

Coming at this from the other end, colon therapy involves inserting water or other solutions into the rectum to “cleanse” the colon, or a part of the large intestine. Colon therapy solutions are instilled through a tube inserted into the rectum and either kept inside the body for a short period of time or allowed to flow naturally back out the rectum. Although colon therapy removes some waste, there isn't enough research to prove that it cleanses your gastrointestinal tract of toxins or improves any medical conditions, such as hypertension and arthritis. In fact, the body already has the liver, which is a built-in organ to efficiently remove toxins. Still, colon cleanses can lead to serious consequences, such as:

- Dehydration
- Diarrhea, cramping, bloating, vomiting
- Electrolyte imbalances
- Perforation of the rectum
- Infection

List adapted from Mayo Clinic [4].

If this were something you still want to do, it's essential to have the help and input from a trained professional in order to minimize the risk of infection or problems with medications.
Although, you didn’t mention specific symptoms of your gastrointestinal distress, it's possible you may be experiencing abdominal pain or discomfort. Some tips to ease abdominal discomfort include regularly sipping small amounts of water or clear fluids rather than lots at one time and eating small amounts of mild foods or avoiding them entirely for a few hours. If you feel like the pain or discomfort is higher up in your stomach, almost in your chest and occurs after meals, antacids, which neutralize stomach acid, may help. With this type of stomach pain, avoiding foods that may trigger heartburn, such as foods that are high in fat, contain caffeine or alcohol, or are highly acidic, may also help relieve the discomfort. Overall, most research and professionals recommend sticking to a balanced diet, staying active, and getting plenty of fluids to combat abdominal distress.

Lastly, you mentioned a recent change in diet. With that in mind, tracking your food intake and symptoms through a diary may be helpful for identifying what exactly is causing the distress and when it occurs. You may even consider having a conversation with your health care provider or requesting a referral to a dietitian. Here’s hoping everything comes out okay!

Alice!

Related questions

- Holding off on number two
- Eating disorders vs. non-disordered eating
- Bloating or water retention?
- The Zone Diet

Resources

- Medical Services (Morningside)
- Columbia Health Nutrition Services (Morningside)
- Medical Services (CUIMC)
- Student Health Service Nutrition Services (CUIMC)

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