

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 going, let's talk about magnesium sulfate, commonly known as Epsom salts. This laxative can be used once in a while to ease constipation, having fewer than two bowel movements per week, or no bowel movement for three days. Symptoms of constipation are difficulty passing stools, hard stools, often feeling like you have not completely passed a stool, a swollen stomach or stomach pain, and vomiting. If constipation has caused your gastrointestinal distress, Epsom salts may be a good option. Since you mentioned a change in your diet was the reason for this gastrointestinal distress, going back to your original diet may also help. If you don't seem to be constipated, Epsom salts are not an appropriate treatment.

While the FDA (Food and Drug Administration) has approved Epsom salts for use as a laxative, other external uses haven't been approved. Epsom salts can also cause serious side effects or interact negatively with other medications, like antibiotics. In general, talking with a health professional before using magnesium sulfate and other laxatives is a good idea. You should especially be careful if:

- You are experiencing extreme stomach pain, vomiting, or nausea.
- Your bowel movements have been different for two weeks or longer.
- You are diabetic, have kidney disease, or have an eating disorder.
- You are adhering to a low magnesium diet.
- You have been using laxatives for a week or more.

- You are pregnant or nursing (Epsom salts may harm unborn or breastfeeding children).

Using too high a dosage of Epsom salts can also be dangerous, so instructions from your health care provider or the package should be followed carefully. To take it orally, you can drink a mixture of one dose of Epsom salts (the amount stated on the package), eight ounces of water, and a small squirt of lemon for taste. Epsom salts can also be used as a soak by dissolving the correct dose (again, refer to the packaging for measurement) into water in a bathtub, and should help you have a bowel movement between 30 minutes and six hours after use.

Switching gears, colon therapy involves using water or other solutions to “cleanse” the colon, or a part of the large intestine. To perform the procedure, a colonic hygienist or a hydrotherapist, positions that require no training in most states, uses a plastic tube inserted through your rectum to fill your colon with liquid, then massages your abdomen, and finally removes the liquid through another tube. Although this method removes some waste, there is no research proving that it cleanses your body of toxins. In fact it can lead to serious consequences, such as:

- Dangerous reactions to ingredients added to the fluid solution, such as herbs or coffee,
- Electrolyte imbalances,
- Rupture of the intestinal wall,
- Infection, and
- Death.

Since you mentioned that your gastrointestinal distress started when your diet changed, you may want to consider seeing a nutritionist before trying Epsom salts or a colon cleanse. Have a conversation with your primary care provider or request a referral to a Dietician. Here’s hoping everything comes out ok.

Alice!

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