

WHY A PARASITE CLEANSE CAN MAKE YOU WORSE

By Karen Vaughan, herbalist and acupuncturist

Spring is the time when people often indulge in a seasonal fast. And since Americans are prone to heroic fasting, many will decide that they should indulge in a parasite cleanse. Black walnut hulls, wormwood and cloves are traditional, often with a cayenne/fiber supplement. And the [Hulda Clark](#) devotees may use an electric “zapper” to kill parasites. There are a number of Chinese medicine antiparasitic remedies. But if you have allergies, [autoimmune disease](#) or simply a weak [immune system](#), a parasite cleanse can make you worse.

The word “parasite” shows our attitude towards even benign worms (“helminths”) that live in our bodies. We don’t like worms, which we usually only notice if they are in overgrowth. They are ugly and primitive. Although only 10% of the cells in our bodies are human, we resist thinking of ourselves as walking colonies in a superstructure. Commensals (which merely inhabit us) or Symbionts (which benefit us) might be better terms.

Of course there are harmful worms which tax our organs or nutrient supply or which burrow into areas where they are dangerous. Or like pinworms which are itchy and contagious. But not all worms fit this definition. And I have long maintained that we most likely have larger organisms along with our probiotic organisms that are necessary to human health.

Some also refer to gut organisms like candida as parasites. I will speak more about that in another piece, but they are also symbionts that are only problematical in overgrowth.

Most people have heard of the [Hygiene Hypothesis](#) which, in its most general form, shows that children not exposed to dirt and bacteria do not stimulate their immune system enough and are then more vulnerable to disease. A deeper understanding has other implications. Our immune system has two major branches (that we know about): TH1 and TH2. Parasites and intracellular antigens trigger the TH1 branch of the immune system while extracellular allergens like food allergies, at least some kinds, trigger the TH2 branch. If your body doesn’t have enough TH1 stimulation, the TH2 may go into overdrive causing autoimmune disease.

However we have seen significant increases in both food allergies and autoimmune systems, so the [Old Friends Hypothesis](#) has been put forward, saying that T regulator cells can only become fully effective if they are stimulated by exposure to fairly benign microorganisms and parasites which have coexisted universally with human beings throughout human history. Examples of organisms that may be important for proper development of T regulatory cells include [lactobacilli](#), various [mycobacteria](#), and certain [helminths](#).

A recent study demonstrated the impact of worms upon genes responsible for making cytokines that regulate inflammation. The diseases studied were autoimmune diseases like Crohn’s Disease (72-100% remission) or Ulcerative Colitis (56%), and allergies like [Celiac Disease](#) (allergy to gluten). There is early research on heart disease. Other diseases not yet studied like Lupus, Rheumatoid Arthritis and a variety of other allergies are likely to show similar effects.

There have been a number of studies using the pig whipworm, a kind of roundworm that will live but not reproduce in people. Eggs are put into a kind of milkshake and are swallowed. As the worms hatch, the inflammation associated with ulcerative colitis or celiac is significantly reduced. The American hookworm is used similarly and has shown benefit for asthma. Neither of these worms is likely to cause disease, increase other parasites, to harm organs or to create other problems. Some people do have allergies to the pig whipworm and cannot use it (but it is easily killed if that happens). *N. americanus*, the species of hookworm used therapeutically, takes on average 0.03ml of blood per day from the host, so anemia is only observed in malnourished individuals with very many hookworms. Both helminths need to be outside of the body to reproduce so the dosage can be controlled.

Approximately 50% of Americans are believed to have some kind of worm, most of which are benign. Worms are more prevalent in the South and children who run barefoot in rural areas are more likely to have them, as well as plantation workers and coal miners. But children in cities and in the north tend to have more autoimmune disease, allergies and asthma.

What we don’t know about allergy and autoimmune disease exceeds what we know by orders of magnitude. But we do know that humans have evolved with certain parasites and microorganisms like those in the gut for millions of years. Having too sterile an environment where we have largely eliminated our benign symbionts along with the bad does increase disease severity.

In Chinese medicine there is the belief that we should all have some of the taint of the environment in order to be able to function within it. Childhood diseases are seen in Chinese medicine and western naturopathy as

necessary to develop a competent immune system, although many of those have been wiped out due to vaccination. Parasites are part of the immune stimulation and this has been shown by current western research. In fact the cardinal sign of imminent death in classical Chinese medicine was that roundworms were leaving the body.

There are a few other cautions to a parasite cleanse that do not have to do with worms. The aromatic bitters used in typical western cleanses are energetically extremely cold and should not be used long term.

If you run cold, are deficient with low immune reserves or are vegan and you actually have parasite problems, then don't use a black walnut type cleanse. It is too cold. You would probably do better on something like Wu Mei San which is warmer and sour. Or at least add lots of dry ginger, oregano or prickly ash to warm up the formula. If you are an excess type who tends to be hot, constipated and red faced with a warming diet, it will be less injurious to your health and digestion.

If you need cleansing, especially long term, then go for a Chinese formula selected for you by a professional who will actually do a TCM diagnosis and select the best one for your pattern, with modifications that fit your particular constitution. A Chinese formula is balanced to increase your digestive fire, tonify your organs, increase or decrease stomach acid as needed as well as to deal with the parasites. And the formula will most likely change over time as you change.

The take away from this is that you should not use a parasite cleanse unless you know that you have been infected by parasites that are injurious to your health. Get a stool test, check for blood anemia and look for symptoms that can be diagnosed. If you live where constant reinfection is an issue and you are malnourished, you likely do need a periodic cleanse and you should build up your blood and your gut afterward.

If you have autoimmune disease, asthma or food allergies like gluten sensitivity, you probably shouldn't do parasite cleanses at all and might investigate the clinical trials that will use benign helminths in a controlled way. Build up your gut bacteria, heal any inflamed mucosa with slippery elm or marshmallow root tea and then see if parasite therapy will benefit you.

Sources

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Wikipedia: [Hygiene Hypothesis](#)

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Further information

[The Helminthic Therapy wiki](#)

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