



Is There a Health Benefit From High Colonics?

By: Thomas Puetz, M.D., Department of Gastroenterology, Aurora Advanced Healthcare, Mequon, WI

QUESTION – I have a friend who frequently uses high colonics. She says it is to improve the health of her colon. I am curious about how effective these treatments are in promoting overall well being.

ANSWER – Before we discuss the potential benefits of high colonics, it is important to understand the function of the colon. In the average adult, the colon (large intestine) measures approximately 4 to 5 feet in length. The colon plays a limited role in absorption of water and sodium. A majority of the fluid exposed to the gastrointestinal tract is first absorbed in the small intestine. Roughly 1 liter will pass into the colon where 80–90% of the remaining fluid will be absorbed. Whatever is left is excreted in the stool. During episodes of decreased small bowel absorption, the colon can accommodate to absorb more fluid and limit the severity of diarrhea. The colon plays a relatively small role when looking at absorption of nutrients, a majority of which are taken up by the small intestine.

Stool consists of numerous bacteria numbering upward of 100 billion per gram of stool content. A majority of the bacteria present in adult colons are anaerobic-bacteria that grow in a non-oxygen environment. These bacteria are useful in controlling the growth of harmful bacteria, such as *Clostridium difficile*. Another benefit provided by the colonic bacteria is the breakdown of complex carbohydrates resulting in the production of fatty acids that are used as an energy source by the cells that line the colon.

High colonics or colonic irrigation consists of flushing large amounts of fluid through a tube into the large bowel. Sometimes 25 gallons of fluid may be required to clear the colon of stool. These fluids can contain a variety of ingredients including herbs, coffee, vitamins, and enzymes. Promoters maintain that beneficial effects result from ridding the body of toxins, bacteria, and parasites that they say can contribute to a wide variety of ailments. Advertised cures for headaches, skin problems, mood swings, colds, fatigue, excess weight, and irritable bowel syndrome are common. The numerous web sites on the Internet will often show a large stool and claim “toxins” in the foul smelling stool cause

inflammation and infections. I would argue that nothing could be farther from the truth.

As outlined earlier, the colonic bacteria that make up stool play an integral role in maintaining gastrointestinal health. There are no reputable medical studies that show frequent colonic cleansing leads to fewer “toxins” or infections in the body.

There is evidence, however, that documents the potential harm associated with the use of high colonics. Complications have ranged from life-threatening fluid and electrolyte changes to perforations sustained from insertion of the colonic tube.

I would caution those who experience a temporary relief from constipation. Constipation may be the first sign of a more serious diagnosis and I would strongly advise a visit to your primary care provider.

In conclusion, I believe these very expensive therapies are nothing more than glorified enemas that carry a much higher risk of injury. I do not recommend high colonics for any medical condition and hope that the information provided will help you make an educated decision.

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