

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING REGULAR

Assessing the risk and benefit of alternative therapy for GI conditions

The regularity of our bodily functions has been used as the 'canary in the mine' for health and wellbeing, since early times. Ancient Egyptians first introduced the concept of 'auto-intoxication' which suggests that undigested food in the colon produces toxic substances that circulate through the body, causing illness.¹ Auto-intoxication is not supported by scientific evidence and is disregarded by most of the medical fraternity today. Waste material does not adhere to the colon wall or produce toxins. However, many people still place faith in 'detoxifying' their digestive system as an important process for their health and well-being. Detoxifying may include a combination of fasting, cleansing ('natural' laxatives) and colonic irrigation (by enema or machine). While short periods of fasting and laxative use are likely to be harmless, enema and colonic irrigation are associated with some serious health risks.

The greatest risk associated with colonic irrigation is perforation of the wall of the colon by mechanical penetration or excessive pressure from liquid forced into the bowel. Risk factors for perforation include older age, recent bowel surgery and conditions such as diverticulitis, inflammatory bowel disease, Crohn's disease and haemorrhoids. Three cases of perforation of the rectum after a colonic irrigation procedure were recently documented in Australia. It was concluded that the potential harm of colonic irrigation outweighs any obvious benefit.²

There is also some concern that introducing large amounts of water into the bowel may result in depletion of electrolytes. People with kidney or heart failure have a higher risk of this.³ Improper sterilisation techniques also contribute to a risk of transmission of pathogens. There have been several cases of amoebiasis reported after colonic irrigation.⁴ Enemas may be associated with many of the same risks as colonic irrigation, if not performed under medical supervision. In addition, coffee, wheat grass, herbs and other substances may be added to the enema solution. This increases the risk of adverse effects including toxicity and allergic reaction.³

Many patients are reluctant to reveal to GPs that they are using complementary therapies. As a general reminder;⁵

- Routinely question patients about their use of alternative therapies
- Discuss the safety, efficacy and merits of commonly used alternative treatments
- Provide information on the risks of some treatments
- Help patients make informed decisions about alternative treatments e.g. find a qualified/licensed provider

For a full version of this article, please visit www.bpac.org.nz Keyword 'colonic'

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