

EAT YOUR WAY THIN

Hollywood's unofficial new diet hinges on reducing acid and balancing your pH. By Liz Krieger

Despite what she thought was a healthy, well-balanced diet, Meri*, a private chef in Los Angeles, was still struggling with the same 10 pounds she'd put on in college. She had lagging energy levels, which she beat back with caffeinated beverages, and endured persistent skin breakouts. Finally, Meri, now 28, saw a nutritionist, who suggested that her diet was too acidic and needed a major alkaline boost. While the changes she made may seem drastic (easing off all dairy, caffeine, and animal-based products), she says the effects of consuming a heavily plant-based, higher-pH diet were quick and dramatic—and well worth it. “It’s amazing,” Meri says. “I have tons of energy now, without coffee. My immune system must be stronger because I haven’t been sick, and I’m breakout-free. Doing an alkaline diet means I’m now 10 pounds lighter.” Wait, what? Acid? Alkaline? For those of you who dozed off during that week of high school chemistry, listen up, because an intriguing diet craze is all about this sort of basic science.

If you’re not chem-savvy, here’s your cram session: The human body, primarily the urinary and lymphatic systems, works hard 24-7 to maintain a slightly alkaline pH level in the blood and to clear out an excess of either acid or alkali. Everything that you consume has its own pH, and the lower it is, the more acidic it is, and the higher it is, the more alkaline it is. Acidic foods tend to be the least healthful: white bread, soda, processed foods, and, to a lesser extent, meat and eggs. An alkaline diet focuses on fresh fruit and vegetables along with soy products (like tofu) and certain nuts and whole grains (such as almonds and quinoa) while minimizing dairy, gluten, processed foods, and sugar. Proponents note that if your diet is too acidic—say, you’re a Diet Coke addict—your body may siphon off vital minerals like calcium from your bones to neutralize the acid. It will also tend to have more toxins, says bicoastal celebrity nutritionist Kimberly Snyder, who treats Meri. The result? Congestion and constriction in your body, which can hamper blood flow, deplete oxygen levels, and speed up the aging process, she explains.

Eventually, too many acidic foods can also stymie the immune system, inhibit digestion, and contribute to things like osteoarthritis, says Lindsey Duncan, a nutritionist and naturopath. (Marc Jacobs is a client.) Neither Duncan’s nor Snyder’s plan calls for a purely fruit-and-veggie diet, but both advocate crowding out “poorer choices”—by including a morning “green” smoothie, for example, and a green salad before dinner—and keeping acidic foods to a minimum. Some acolytes are going even further, ditching acidic tap or bottled waters for alkalized Kangen Water, produced by water-ionization machines from Enagic, a Japanese company that claims its water flushes out toxins better than regular H₂O. The water is a hit among Hollywood A-listers, who attribute their renewed vigor to it. Carola Gonzalez, a makeup artist to the stars, invested \$4,300 in an Enagic machine. “My skin feels amazingly hydrated, and my fine lines are gone,” Gonzalez says. “And I haven’t been sick once since I got it.”

The bottom line: Should we all go alkaline, all the time, and ASAP? While few experts would dispute the virtues of a diet high in dark leafy greens, juicy fruit, and plenty of water, it’s hard to give all the credit to pH, says nutritionist Lisa Young, an adjunct professor at New York University. “There are so many vitamins, minerals, and nutrients in these items that could be in play,” she says. The bone health benefits have the most solid research behind them, “but beyond that, controlled studies that isolate pH as the main factor in health changes are lacking,” says David Katz, a preventive-medicine expert and director of the Yale-Griffin Prevention Research Center. What’s more, he doesn’t believe the body needs extra help with its pH levels. “It’s very, very strictly regulated,” he says. “The truth is, a high-quality diet that’s heavy on produce with scarce processed foods is always a good idea.” As is focusing on the overall quality of what you consume, because it may lead you to a more alkaline diet. “The pH thing will sort itself out.” ■ **Name has been changed*

Photograph by Victor Demarchelier