

The Strip Club

Averse to counting carbs and subsisting on shakes, one writer sets her sights on pH levels and attempts the alkaline diet.

BY AMY M. THOMAS



PINE FOR ALKALINE

Say goodbye to bread, cheese, and chocolate. To go alkaline, one has to embrace all things green.

HAVE A CONFESSION TO MAKE: I'VE NEVER BEEN A dieter. Of course I watch what I eat and exercise regularly, and I'm as emotionally attached to the number on the scale as I am to the fit of my jeans. But the only time I actually tried a health trend was when I was seduced by the rapid weight loss promised by the Master Cleanse. I lasted barely 48 hours before trading in its signature maple syrup-infused lemonade for a double café au lait and a tartine smothered in Nutella. It was validation: Diets and I don't get along.

Yet recently, right off a two-year stint in Paris in which pastries, cheese, and wine were my holy trinity, I thought it might be time to reboot my system. It was either diet or invest in a new wardrobe—and I wasn't willing to say *au revoir* to my fancy new French clothes. But which one? I don't eat red meat, so Scarsdale, Atkins, and other high-protein regimes were out. I'd already dabbled in veganism, and I knew I wasn't willing to learn how to sprout seeds to go raw. I don't believe in milkshakes as meal replacements, so even

relaxed cleanses were out. In fact, everything sounded so extreme or gimmicky that when my hairdresser told me about the alkaline diet, which is based on the pH levels of foods, I was game. The diet's been around for decades but has become increasingly popular in recent years after the publication of dozens of books extolling the plan's health benefits, including increased energy and mental clarity, better circulation and digestion, a stronger immune system, and, of course, weight loss.

Although it sounds as complicated as a chemistry exam, the alkaline diet is relatively straightforward: eat foods—leafy green vegetables, almonds, pumpkin seeds, and alfalfa sprouts among them—that make the body more alkaline. Just as 98.6 is our optimal temperature, a healthy body should be slightly alkaline—specifically, 7.365 on the pH scale of 0 (extremely acidic) to 14 (extremely alkaline). However, our Western diet, full as it is of sugar, caffeine, meat, grains, and dairy, is mostly acidic. When food is digested, it leaves behind a residue called ash, and when too much acidic ash accumulates, it damages cells and tissues and robs the body of key minerals such as calcium and potassium. These minerals help keep inflammation in check—which is important, as chronic inflammation breeds disease (hence, anti-inflammatory diets). According to alkaline diet advocates such as Robert O. Young, author of *The pH Miracle: Balance Your Diet, Reclaim Your Health*, high acidity directly leads to illness. “The obvious clue is right there in the top three killers,” he writes, referring to cancer, heart disease, and diabetes. “All are directly linked to diet.”

Naturally, any eating plan that focuses almost exclusively on vegetables will yield results. But to truly adhere to an alkaline diet, you have to get specific. Would I really have to embrace wheat grass and give up foods like eggs, peanut butter, and red wine—which I had long been told are healthy—in the name of higher alkalinity? I turned to Anthony Salzarulo, a holistic practitioner in Manhattan, to guide me on my four-week reboot. Although he uses the diet to treat chronic infections, fatigue, and high blood pressure, he also deals with regular overindulgences like me, who just want to feel better. “Alkaline foods take a lot of stress off of the body, because it doesn't have to use extra energy to move itself toward a state of alkalinity,” Salzarulo said. When I asked him if it wouldn't be equally effective to just quit eating pastries, he explained further: “Sugar and dairy are acidic foods, so cutting them out will put less of an acidic strain on the body but will not have as powerful an effect as adding alkaline foods, such as green vegetables and juices.”

Mornings were easy. After going through mild caffeine withdrawal (coffee is considered highly alkaline), I grew to love blending my own green juices. I was already a salad eater, so my new diet required only a modest switch at lunch: skip the feta and croutons and throw in alkalizing avocado, sprouts, and seeds. But by midday I was struggling. What I really wanted was a peanut butter-bomb cupcake, but I reached instead for...soy nuts. Even the humble banana, a snack I'd come to regard as both healthy and satisfying, was to be avoided. A banana is 25 percent sugar, after all. What's more, the riper it gets, the more sugary it gets, which is why only

Photograph by GENTL & HYERS

green bananas are acceptable. But who wants to eat unripe fruit? I begged off of a few happy hour dates to avoid alcohol and scoured MenuPages.com to find restaurants with vegetable-heavy entrées that went beyond the standard portobello burger.

Meanwhile, I mastered peeing on a pH strip and was fascinated by how quickly the readings reflected my new eating habits. My very first day, after a spinach salad with tomato, asparagus, and broccoli, my pH jumped from a lowly 5.5 to 6.8. Salzarulo encouraged me to test my pH thrice daily, after meals, and though it quickly became a nuisance, I was thrilled when I got readings that were at or above the recommended levels.

It's exactly this reliance on frequently fluctuating pH numbers that skeptics of the alkaline diet don't like. Dr. Leo Galland, director of the Foundation for Integrated Medicine, explains that the way the body metabolizes food and how it regulates the pH levels of different tissues are more complex processes than a pH reading from urine or saliva can measure. In other words, he finds the alkaline diet simply too reductive and the readings gimmicky—no matter how well-meaning.

It's true that some of the diet's adherents go a little crazy, drinking only alkaline water and satisfying sweets cravings with red peppers (which is just sad, if you ask me). But Kris Carr, the motivational speaker behind the documentary *Crazy Sexy Cancer*, who attributes her survival of stage 4 vascular cancer in part to a pH-balanced anti-inflammatory vegan diet, comes off as a bit more grounded.

"There are shades of gray," she says, acknowledging that some foods like legumes and grains are considered acidic but are also important protein sources. Carr suggests moderate goals, such as filling half of your plate with vegetables

and reducing big acidic meals to three times a week, along with adding "accessories" like lemon—which is indeed acidic outside the body but alkalizing inside—to water.

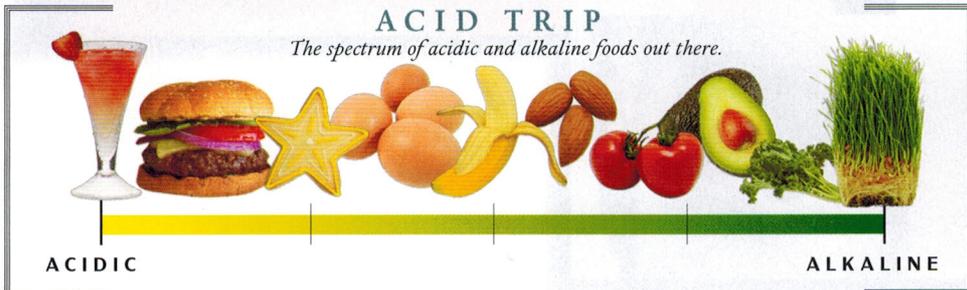
There is only anecdotal proof that an alkaline diet can improve health and cure illnesses, but I liked Carr's down-to-earth "plant-powered" approach, as well as Salzarulo's definition of good health: a body that can regulate its physiology without the "crutch" of pharmaceuticals. I also appreciated that while other diets focus solely on food, the alkaline diet takes a more holistic approach. In addition to what you eat, pH levels are influenced by the amount and quality of sleep you get, your emotional state (stress = acidic), and how much carbon dioxide you expel through breathing and exercise.

Ten days in I was feeling—and seeing—the diet's effects. Gone were the mid-day energy slumps, and I literally had a lightness in my step. Still, for someone who loves food, it just wasn't sustainable. I hated giving up antioxidant-rich blueberries, for example, or cutting out "superfoods" like salmon and yogurt, because they're all acidic.

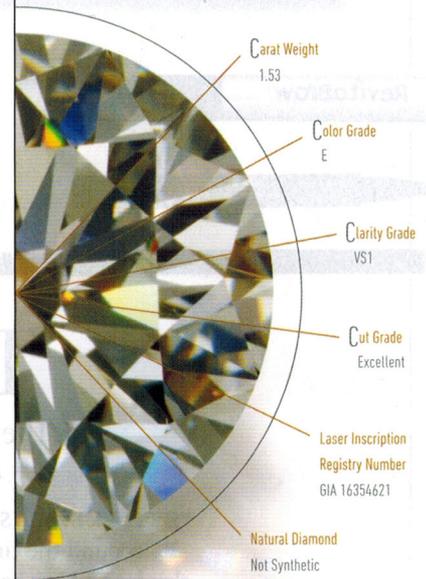
Two weeks in I switched from 100 percent alkaline foods to the recommended 80/20 balance. I had sushi, which is acidic, with miso soup and seaweed salad, both alkaline. I even had some gummies, but instead of devouring a whole bag I plucked out just a few. After four weeks I was officially off the diet, but with newfound looseness in my jeans encouraging me, I retained some alkaline practices. (Who knew I'd love those green juices so much?)

In the end, I won't give up dairy or alcohol, and I find too much pleasure even in a ripe banana to bid farewell to sweets. But the alkaline diet was a kinder way to cleanse my system, reignite healthier eating habits, and stop overindulging. After all, as the diet advocates, life is all about balance. ●

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