

Why are so many men trying colonic irrigation? Greg Gordon had the guts to find out

In the week before Christmas, I found myself naked from the waist down while a pretty stranger inserted a tube into my lubricated backside. And the only excuse I can muster is to blame a friend. I was having second thoughts about colonic irrigation, but it was, quite clearly, too late to back out.

Last summer, I was seduced by the testimony of a longtime disciple of the male colonic cult that is sweeping the nation. Bright-eyed, effervescent and a few days past his 31st birthday, Ken (not his real name) divulged his secret over lunch in a suitably manly Glasgow cafe. In hushed tones, he said that his health had been transformed by an unusual gift from his girlfriend.

What Ken, an up-and-coming chef, hadn't appreciated when he cashed in his colonic-irrigation vouchers was that he was taking part in a burgeoning male trend. "It's not something we can talk about yet," he told me over a plate of egg and chips. "It breaches too many male taboos — sexual orientation, unseemly vanity, human waste and anal penetration. No wonder it's described as 'the treatment that dare not speak its name'."

Since Ken took the plunge, so to speak, he has been surprised at how interested his friends are: "Sure, you get all the gags — 'It's a bum deal', 'It's not all it's cracked up to be' — but once the laughter subsides, it's clear that most men secretly want to try it."

Robbie Williams is a fan — he thanked his irrigationist for showing him "a brighter and clearer path" at an awards ceremony — and the therapy is also gaining cult status among DJs and clubbers who are keen to undo the excesses of their youth.

Colonic irrigation is an internal bath of warm, filtered water, which cleanses the colon of accumulated faecal matter, mucous, gas and toxins. Practitioners promise improved general health and relief from colitis, flatulence, IBS, psoriasis, eczema, ME, asthma, allergies and even depression.

Unlike some of the new-age regimes of so-called colonic camps in Thailand and Portugal, British clinics place a premium on safety, cleanliness and personal modesty. As for the sluicing, I can testify that it's a peculiar sensation, with lots of gassy burbling, but it's not painful, embarrassing or uncomfortable.

The allure lies in its reputation as a quick fix. The idea that you can wash away the debris left by a lifetime's intake of beer and Big Macs with one quick squirt is appealing to the lazy. Which is why colonic irrigation is attracting those with a penchant for partying and no time for tofu and thrice-weekly gym visits.

"One-third of our clients are men," says Collette Nicol, the therapist at the Buckingham Clinic in Glasgow. "They are ordinary blokes who want to change their lifestyles. It isn't just for gay or vain men — it's even mentioned in the Bible. Most of my clients come because their girlfriends have been and liked the results."

A healthy colon is populated by billions of friendly bacteria, which detoxify waste, synthesise vitamins and protect us from infection. Irrigationists base their businesses on the fact that our modern lifestyle — stressed-out and chowing down on processed foods, caffeine and alcohol — alters the colon's chemical balance. Without the friendly bacteria, faeces stay jammed in our colons (often for weeks) and this internal soup of soluble waste, parasites and toxins is continually reabsorbed into the bloodstream. Tasty.

Armed with this information and with Ken's encouragement still ringing in my ears, I signed up for the recommended six sessions. I hoped to attain a general sense of wellbeing and an end to the

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familiar sluggishness that arrives with the first coffee of the afternoon and lingers until bedtime. Dr Keith Hopcroft, a sceptical men's health adviser, just wished me luck: "You might experience a placebo effect, the kind of thing that you would expect of someone making lifestyle changes following any complementary therapy. Like homeopathy, there is no scientific evidence to suggest that colonic irrigation has any effect."

Graham Sunderland, a consultant surgeon at the colorectal surgery department of Glasgow's Southern General Hospital, however, maintains an open mind. "It's not a mainstream therapy, but its longevity and the claims of people who've used it suggest that there may be something in it. There is no hard evidence, but that could just mean that some serious research is long overdue."

I may be a sample of one, but my own anecdotal evidence makes me a believer. In the week of my first three sessions, I was unprecedentedly productive. I completely researched and conducted interviews for four newspaper features (then wrote three of them); I visited the Buckingham clinic three times; appeared as

a guest on a breakfast-time radio show; presided over a family gathering where the in-laws met for the first time; and still had time for a Christmas grocery shop and a night out. It's also hard to ignore the tale of the scales. After my third session, I had lost an inch off my waist and half a stone (although I'm told that this is lost water and waste, not body fat).

Perhaps, as Hopcroft would contend, this kick-start to wellbeing was actually the result of six hours' worth of exclusive attention from a nice young lady, but as far as I'm concerned the numbers don't lie. Following my therapist's advice I have kept the weight off, easily replaced cravings for sweets, snacks and coffee with mugs of warmed water and a cocktail of toasted seeds. There is a new-found spring in my step and I have definitely got a twinkle in my eye. Your GP might scoff, but you can't get that on the NHS.

The Buckingham Clinic (0141 339 4340); first consultation and treatment costs £50; subsequent sessions cost £48. The Association & Register of Colon Hydrotherapists: www.colonic-association.com