

Ask The Dietician: Are There Health Benefits To Eating Clay?

By Alicia Armeli

Hot celebs are doing it. The media's buzzing about it. Your neighbor says it makes her skin glow. So what's all the fuss about? Clay. And I don't mean making a mask and slathering it on your body for the sake of a do-it-yourself spa night. I mean swallow, grin and bear it.

Recently a lot of attention has been given to the possible health benefits of ingesting clay—specifically bentonite clay. And apparently it can do it all. Ranging from weight loss and body detox to nothing short of parting the Red Sea, clay is the newest health and beauty trend. But what exactly is bentonite clay and is it safe to consume?

What Is Bentonite Clay?

Derived from volcanic ash, bentonite or Fuller's earth is a type of clay made up of minerals from the smectite group. The smectite seen in the majority of bentonites is montmorillonite—most commonly the sodium and calcium variety. Other montmorillonites are rich in lithium, magnesium, or iron.

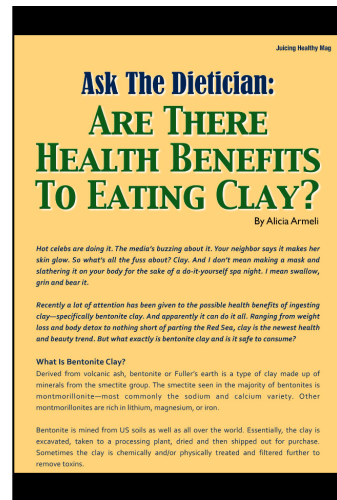
Bentonite is mined from US soils as well as all over the world. Essentially, the clay is excavated, taken to a processing plant, dried and then shipped out for purchase. Sometimes the clay is chemically and/or physically treated and filtered further to remove toxins.

Applauded for its absorptive capabilities, bentonite is often used to remove impurities, toxins, and metals during processes such as product manufacturing and industrial wastewater treatment. Because some varieties can also absorb large amounts of water, it's used in products such as cat litter.

Is It Safe For Me To Consume?

This is where it gets muddy (no pun intended). Although bentonite has many uses in the chemical, manufacturing, and industrial world, there's little current scientific evidence to support the health benefits of clay consumption. People are transferring its uses from one field to an entirely unrelated one without sufficient research to back it up. As a health professional, this is my first red flag.

However, allow me to play devil's advocate. Let's say it does remove metals from the body. This isn't always a good thing. We need trace minerals (yes, metals) such as iron, zinc, copper, and selenium for many necessary metabolic processes and pathways. If clay isn't differentiating between what's needed and what's not, this could lead to mineral deficiencies.



As mentioned, varieties of bentonite clay have the ability to soak up water and swell many times larger than the original size. Without having a tested standard dosage to consume or guidance as to how much water is needed to pass it through the digestive tract comfortably, this could potentially lead to conditions like constipation. Second red flag.

My third and final red flag (or more like a burning flare in the night sky) is the fact that bentonite clay, no matter how pure the manufacturer claims it to be, is not regulated by the FDA. This means it could contain toxins, heavy metals, and whatever else was in the soil it came from. You could potentially be ingesting more than you bargained for.

Recall bentonite consists mainly of minerals of the smectite group. These are known to contain hydrous aluminum silicates. Effects of low-level chronic aluminum exposure over time have been linked to immune suppression and dementia.

What Can I Do Instead?

Learn to trust your body. We have an amazing set of organs that detox for us *if* we stay nourished. Eating a varied whole foods diet rich in adequate protein, fiber, cruciferous veggies, sulfur-containing foods like onions and garlic, and antioxidant rich fruits will prompt your body to detox naturally.

Staying physically active can also aid with natural detox because it helps usher contaminants stored in lymph fluid out of the body. What's more, sweating has been shown to boost liver detoxification. With proper nutrition, exercise can increase levels of detoxification and antioxidant enzyme activity. And as always, remember to stay hydrated. This will support the flushing of impurities from the body.

When it comes to weight loss, eating clay isn't going to be a healthy way to do it. I can see why it may happen temporarily—eating clay would definitely make me lose my appetite. However, with small gradual lifestyle modifications and help from a doctor and Registered Dietitian, healthy weight loss can be something attainable and sustainable.

My take on eating clay is this, until further investigation is done and regulation is initiated, it's better to leave it for external uses only.

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