

**Clean(ish)**

# A quick heads-up.

Before we get into this Blink, just a little heads-up: there's some language about the restriction and avoidance of certain kinds of foods, so please read with care. In these blinks, you'll discover

why labels like "all natural" or "fragrance-free" are misleading; why certain oils are healthier than others; and the amazing health benefits of walking barefoot on the beach.

## **The world is full of harmful toxins - but our bodies are capable of cleaning themselves.**

There's no point in sugarcoating it: our relationship with food has become fraught. Choosing food has become kind of like a second job. It's a mathematical task, and even an obsession to some: counting calories! It can be a fun little challenge trying to pronounce all the ingredients listed on your bag of chips. But when you're bombarded by articles decrying the obesity epidemic and social-media posts showing us all these idealized versions of perfect meals and bodies, it's easy to feel overwhelmed. Gin Stephens, the author, is no stranger to those feelings. She grew up on frozen chicken pot pies and white bread bologna sandwiches. She was often unhappy with her weight and struggled with different dieting schemes - until she found a simple and effective way to get rid of her extra pounds: clean eating and intermittent fasting. But the change? It didn't happen overnight. And it took her a long time to understand the relationship between what she put into her body and what it looked like - and it started with an experience she'd had years earlier. In the early 2000s, Gin was a stressed-out mother of two boys. Like most parents, she wanted the best for her kids. At some point, her younger son, Will, began throwing tantrums in day care. She had no idea what to do. Will was growing up in a loving environment; there was no obvious reason for him to act out. It was a kind and perceptive kindergarten teacher - Ms. Karen - who ended up asking the life-changing question: What did he eat today? That one question led Gin to a journey of research, discovery, and experimentation, until she began noticing the connection between hyperactivity and artificial dyes. And so she changed Will's diet and many of his personal products - and voilà: she saw an immediate transformation in her son's behavior. But the research also led her to a broader understanding about how toxins affect our body and how we can clean them out. Fair warning. This Blink will require us to spend some time confronting a difficult fact: much of our food is tainted. And it's not just our food. Many of our household products, and even our water and our air, are filled with toxins, too. It's not always fun to hear or think about. It can feel like opening up Pandora's little box of poisons. But - and this is a big but - there's good news in this Blink too. You already have an amazing body that was designed to clean itself - and there are ways that you can actually help your body do this more effectively. But at some point you'll still notice that layer of dust on a shelf. And that's when you want to make sure to clean out the build up that you can't avoid. But Gin thinks the ultimate goal is to be clean-ish, not clean. That's a deliberate choice. You don't need to do the impossible. You don't need to transform immediately or completely. But it is helpful to learn, to identify where your body might be coming into contact with lots of

toxins, and to hopefully make some changes that allow you to be happier and healthier.

## **We inhale and absorb toxins from our daily environments.**

Most importantly, be sure to practice compassion with yourself as you try to make these changes. It's a hard thing to feel like you're getting right, and an impossible thing to feel like you're getting perfect – and informing yourself is a step in the right direction. With that in mind, let's step outside for a minute. Outside our bodies. Being clean is largely about what we eat. But what we absorb also plays a role – what we breathe in, what we put on our skin, what we surround ourselves with. Along with the good and the harmless things, we also absorb hormone disruptors, respiratory toxins, development toxins, and carcinogens. And the way these toxins get into your body are through your everyday products: shampoo, drinking water, car emissions, your lunchbox, your frying pan. It's not one big thing, but lots and lots of tiny things. Every. Single. Day. And they have a bunch of effects on your body. You may not know you're absorbing these things, but you are feeling the effects. Headaches, weird body smells, skin issues, trouble sleeping, weight gain – these are all tied to your toxic load. And these toxins are so pervasive that even newborn babies have them in their systems. Let's look at an example. There's a toxin – it's called obesogen – that disrupts our endocrine system, which interrupts the pathways that our hormones take and affects the chemical messages that control our behavior. These are chemicals that influence our metabolism and – you might have guessed it – promote obesity. Not to scare you but . . . they're found everywhere, from cookware to bathroom products, all over your home sweet home. When absorbed into your body, they can actually lead to more fat creation and storage. This feeds back into more hormone disruption because fat cells already secrete more hormones. So it can be a really difficult cycle to break. And that's just one example. So, if you're feeling brave enough, take a look in your bathroom cabinets, the cupboard under your kitchen sink, and in your cosmetics bag. Many brands of air fresheners and toilet cleaners, dishwasher detergents, dryer sheets, and floor polish contain things like phthalates and benzyl acetate, which aren't just difficult to pronounce; they can have a load of unpleasant side effects, ranging from aggravating asthma to causing liver damage. Reach into your makeup bag or skincare regimen, and it's the same story. You might be thinking, Hang on! I buy everything natural and hypoallergenic. Look, it's even unscented! Unfortunately, words like hypoallergenic sound great but are not actually attached to any real or tangible FDA approval. They are a result of companies "greenwashing" their products, making them sound more eco-friendly and better for us than they actually are. "Natural" might mean something comes from a natural source, but that doesn't mean it's necessarily safe for you. Take the example of arsenic: that's naturally occurring, but it's certainly not an ingredient you want to consume! And speaking of consuming, it's time to confront the elephant in the room. You may have gone through your bathroom cabinets with Gin's list in hand, but it's time to face your pantry – and, with that, maybe our biggest challenge in trying to live clean: food. Or, rather, what we think of as food.

## **Real food always trumps processed food.**

First, a little history lesson. As part of the New Deal after the Great Depression, crops like corn, wheat and soybeans were heavily subsidized by the American government. Obviously, that led farmers to focus more on these crops, so they came to occupy a huge share of farm production overall, which means they're in just about every commercially produced food. Then add in the fact that only about 15 big companies control most commercial food production. Let's think about how that might affect our food supply. So, for one thing, almost everything we eat that comes from industrial farming and food production is drenched in pesticides. Also, many crops have been genetically modified, and the jury's still out on what harm that might cause. And, if you eat meat, keep in mind that chickens and cows don't always get to eat what nature intended them to. What they do get are lots of antibiotics. Now put all of the above together, and chances are that almost any major processed food you pick up at a supermarket is tainted in some way. Over-processed foods can add to weight problems because they're made to be tasty - so that we binge on them instead of on real food, which has lost all its flavor thanks to those farming practices I just talked about. Most foods fall somewhere on a continuum from natural (which is generally good for you) to processed (which is generally bad). Look at an apple, for example. If you pick it from a tree and eat it, it's definitely on the natural end of the scale. If you make applesauce from it, it's somewhere in the middle. Apple-flavored cereal - well, it doesn't really get more processed than this. Over and over, through multiple studies, an ultra-processed diet has been linked to diabetes, cancer, cardiovascular disease, digestion problems and many more health issues. It's pretty easy to figure out why. For one thing, they're full of things that aren't actually food. Let's get back to that apple example. The natural apple has one ingredient. You know, apple. That's it. But the flavored cereal is likely to contain things like artificial dyes, highly refined grains, sugar, high-fructose corn syrup, and food additives. Sometimes, ingredients that we all know are bad for us are hidden under pseudonyms like "plant protein extract" or "natural flavors." Processed foods also often contain oils that aren't as good for us as we may have been led to think. You might be surprised to hear that common and popular options like soybean, canola, sunflower, and cottonseed have been linked to conditions like IBS, or irritable bowel syndrome. Traditionally, people cooked with natural oils like olive and coconut. Here's another thing to remember: people who eat a lot of processed foods are twice as likely to have short telomeres than long ones. Telomeres are the parts of our cells that are connected to aging - the longer they are, the fewer diseases you're likely to have and the longer you live. It can be an eye-opener - and not always a pleasant one. But cleaning out your fridge and pantry and heading to the grocery store with a better idea of what you want to be eating - or with the help of an app - can help you find the most natural and best foods, which will really pay off in the long run.

## **The definition of “eating well” varies depending on the individual.**

What is the best way to eat? In the early 1900s, all these scientists and researchers were studying the diets and health of remote populations around the world. And they noticed that those who did not eat a Western diet had fewer cases of heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, cancer - all these scourges of the modern world. They even had better teeth! But it wasn't that clear what they all had in common. Some were vegetarian. Some ate seafood. Some never touched dairy. But there was one noticeable pattern: they all ate food that was local and seasonal. And they ate real food. The main key to being “clean-ish” is to eat real and natural foods as much as possible. Even when

you're buying processed or packaged foods, make sure they contain recognizable food ingredients – and, generally the less ingredients in something overall, the better (like that apple . . . made of apple). For those of you who can, try to eat certified organic foods to minimize the pesticides entering your system. And what also helps is to pay attention to those labels. “All-natural” doesn't mean it can't have pesticides. “Cage-free” doesn't mean the chickens weren't confined to a small area while they were laying eggs. This may sound confusing and even a little unsettling. How are you supposed to know which labels to trust? According to Gin's research, you can't really go wrong with products that are labeled USDA Organic or Non-GMO Project Verified. If you're still unsure, there's also apps and organizations that you can consult to get a better sense of the safest foods to eat. There's one important point to keep in mind: even when you're eating real and natural food, there is no one-size-fits-all answer as to what kinds of food to eat. We are all individuals, and we have all grown up in cultures and societies that have adapted to different environments. What works for one person and makes them feel healthy might not work for someone else. Because our bodies are all a little bit different. Our gut microbiomes – that's the ecosystem of bacteria in our guts – are different too. We want to have a diverse microbiome to better digest our food and release the nutrients that nourish us. That's why it's beneficial to eat a wide range of plant-based food; that's how we keep our microbiome stocked with variety. And this not only helps nourish the body; it also helps detoxify it.

## **The right food can help our bodies clean themselves naturally.**

Now that we've talked about all the toxins floating in and around us every day, let's get to the magical ways that our body naturally deals with them. Think of your body as The Avengers, a group of superheroes fighting against toxins – both the ones in- and outside of our bodies. The first one is the liver, which works relentlessly around the clock to filter out the worst and most damaging of toxins. So, what can we do to help? We can lessen its workload by giving it fewer toxins, and also giving it more nutritious food. Consider cutting down on alcohol consumption. Alcohol automatically moves to the front of the line at the liver, so nothing else can be detoxified while there's a large quantity of it sitting there. Number 2 in the detox crew are our kidneys, which take on the bulk of internal toxins our body creates. If you're still not convinced that could be another good argument to say no to that last glass of wine. Next up – our lungs! They do the hard work of filtering out toxins from our air. To help out your lungs, you can reduce toxins and pollutants in the air, by using air purifiers or – a more decorative way – bringing more houseplants into your home. And it goes almost without saying, but exercise – getting those lungs working – is obviously good too. An organ we sometimes don't think about is actually our biggest one. At about 21 square feet, the skin is our largest detox army member. We know that drugs and toxic metals are excreted through the skin because they're found in sweat samples. So, there's an easy way to help the skin do its job – work up a sweat! Another hard worker is the lymphatic system. It might sound a little gross, but you can think of it as the sewer system that carries waste from all parts of the body to the liver and the kidneys for its final elimination. It also takes out extra liquid and waste products. You can keep your lymphatic system healthy by, again, eating lots of plant foods, walking a lot, and – simply enough – brushing your skin with a bristle brush.

The glymphatic system is like the lymphatic system but for the brain – and with a g. When you sleep, it clears out the wasteful byproducts of brain function. It thrives on



good sleep and – you guessed it – exercise. And then there’s the colon. The colon is our last hero of the bunch, and to keep it functioning well we need lots of fiber. Processed food not only causes blockage but can also damage the colon lining, which can cause the gut to leak and lead to a whole host of other problems.

So, how can we support all of the above? Basically, by putting good food in our bodies. That would mean: fruits and vegetables, herbs and spices, nuts, seeds, and whole grains. And remember: variety is key. We learned about “bad” chemicals earlier. Now let’s look at the good ones. Here’s a good list: There’s flavonoids – those are found in dark chocolate, apples, onion, and beer. And consuming those, obviously in moderation, can help with cancer and liver disease. Phenolic acids from seeds and whole grains work against diabetes and inflammation. Stilbenes – those are in red wine and peanuts – are effective against obesity and neurological diseases. And this could be interesting for many of the women out there – lignans, from cashews, flaxseeds, and olive oils, can help with menopausal symptoms, osteoporosis, and breast cancer. There are too many of these good chemicals to name – so, again, it’s about making sure to eat a wide variety of whole foods. This helps bring in vitamins, minerals, fiber, and even the right types of bacteria, fungus, and viruses that we need to help build up those diverse microbiomes.

## **Small lifestyle changes can lead to huge results – but compassion and patience are key.**

Now that we know what to eat, let’s take a quick look at how to eat. Gin Stephens is a huge advocate of intermittent fasting. You’ve probably heard of intermittent fasting. In case you haven’t, you basically set a time window for the hours that you can eat in. Most people go 16 hours without eating, so, for example, you could eat breakfast at 11 a.m. and stop eating by 7 p.m. Outside of those times, you limit yourself to water, black coffee, or plain tea. There’s evidence that intermittent fasting can actually stop tumors from forming. And it cleans up the protein buildup in your brain – which is what leads to diseases like Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s. Part of what makes intermittent fasting so successful is that it stimulates a process called autophagy. Autophagy is kind of like the recycling and clean up process in the body that takes place at a cellular level. When that doesn’t happen properly it ages us faster and puts us at risk for various diseases. We can stimulate autophagy by restricting calories, exercising, and getting high quality sleep. Sleep is that powerful tool that we know is essential for cleaning up our brain – but, still, way too many of us neglect. We need to give our brain the chance to restore and rejuvenate. A lot of us still struggle with sleeping. If that’s you, it might help to avoid caffeine in the afternoons and evenings, find and stick to a regular sleep routine, and make sure to keep your room dark, cool and quiet. We’ve been talking a lot about restriction and avoidance. So, here’s one really pleasant way to cleanse: walking barefoot outdoors. You can do this on the soil, grass, or sand. This is a process called “earthing” and when we do it electrons flow into our bodies, acting as antioxidants and neutralizing free radicals. This ends up decreasing inflammation and increasing immunity. Which keeps us healthy! Again, keep in mind that the key to success in all of this clean living advice lies in the “-ish.” It won’t be possible to be perfect all the time but we can organize our lives to make it easier to be mindful about food. There’s a few simple things we can do: Try to buy basic ingredients and foods in season and in bulk; frozen or canned food can be just as nutritious and they last a long time. Gin, the author, chooses to do this by stocking her freezer with nutritious staples and ordering

from meal kit delivery companies.

Another thing would be to try and swap out ingredients, such as processed sugar. If you're cooking or baking something, you could use honey, maple syrup, or blackstrap molasses. And then decide what it is that you can just cut out entirely. Maybe soda and sweetened beverages. From a health perspective, there aren't a lot of arguments to be made about why you should drink them. But remember: if you are dining out or enjoying something, just do it without guilt. Gin – who's spent a lot of time looking into clean living – explains that there's still nothing that replaces Duke's mayonnaise or regular deodorant for her. And she makes the good point that practicing guilt trips and negative self-talk can't be the answer. Eating clean-ish shouldn't become an obsession that restricts your life, or makes you judge yourself or your body negatively. This journey is not one of fear and obsession, but one that requires forgiveness, compassion, grace.

## Final summary

The key message in these blinks is that: Leading a clean lifestyle entails making wise choices at the grocery store and at home. Taking many small, manageable steps can have the enormous effect of cleaning the toxins right out of your life – leaving you happier, healthier, and lighter.