



# THE TRUTH ABOUT FAD HEALTH AND BEAUTY TREATMENTS

From vitamin drips to blood irradiation, new salon and spa treatments promise health and beauty benefits – but are they safe and do they work?  
By Glynis Horning

**R**ihanna, Madonna and Geri Halliwell are reportedly among those hooked on the latest fad: intravenous (IV) therapy. Rihanna tweeted a picture showing her apparently on what's been dubbed 'the party-girl drip', a vitamin cocktail claimed to cure hangovers and clear up complexions. This and other treatments are now available in South Africa. Should you try them? Read on – and if you opt to, use a reputable centre run by qualified, experienced doctors.

## IV VITAMIN THERAPY

**WHAT IT IS** A solution of vitamins and minerals is dripped into your veins over one or two hours while you recline in an armchair. The original 'Myers' Cocktail' was invented 30 years ago by US doctor John Myers for seriously malnourished or ill patients, and includes calcium, magnesium, glutathione and vitamins C and B in mega doses (the vitamin C dose can be 300 times the recommended daily allowance). Today the trend is to customise the mix, though celebrity dieters favour the classic. To counter stress you could be given vitamin B; to sleep better, vitamin D; to lose weight, L-carnitine; to boost immunity, zinc. Drips can be given as instant 'pick-me-ups' or in a course.

**COST** About R950 per infusion.

**FOR** Practitioners say that, because the drip bypasses your digestive system, the effects can be felt in hours, and range from greater energy to clearer eyes and skin. 'Glutathione is an important liver detoxifier and also responsible for the skin-brightening effect,' says Dr Maureen Allem, MD of Skin, Body and Health Renewal and Oasis Spas countrywide. The therapy is also used for relief from colds, depression, migraines, drug withdrawal and asthma. 'I mostly use mega-dose IV vitamin C for cancer and in lesser dosage for other chronic immune-related issues, but think it's over the top for colds and flu,'

says Dr Charles Wildervanck, head of the Integrative Health Centre in Port Elizabeth.

**AGAINST** Critics say it may have a place if you are severely nutritionally deprived but there is no solid scientific evidence that it is beneficial otherwise. Unless you have a vitamin B or C deficiency, more won't boost your energy, says Suna Kassier, a dietitian in the Discipline of Dietetics and Human Nutrition at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. 'It's like fuelling your car, which won't go if the tank is empty but also won't go faster if full rather than half full. Vitamins B and C are water-soluble so you excrete the excess,' she says, but A, D, E and K are fat-soluble and mega doses can be toxic. 'Certain vitamins and minerals enhance each other's absorption, so it's better to obtain them from food. Also, some nutrients compete for the same carriers in the body, so over-administration of one nutrient can impair absorption of another. That's why it's not recommended to ingest individual nutrients, especially in mega doses.' IV treatments also have risks of infection, bruising and inflammation of veins. 'The safest way to get vitamins is still a balanced diet,' she says.

## CHELATION THERAPY (HEAVY-METAL DETOX)

**WHAT IT IS** Chemical agents are administered, again by drip, to bind with toxic metals in your blood so you can eliminate these as urine.

**COST** About R950 per infusion.

**FOR** Practitioners say we all harbour toxic metals such as lead, arsenic and mercury from traces in our food and water, and these can cause illness. Even small doses of mercury can produce chronic fatigue, pain, neurological disorders, heart disease and cancer. 'In my opinion the main source of mercury in the Western world is still dental amalgam fillings,' says Wildervanck.

## Mega doses of fat-soluble vitamins A, D, E and K can be toxic

Chelation therapy is said to promote good health and slow ageing.

**AGAINST** Critics say it has a place for proven acute heavy-metal poisoning but there is no hard evidence that it's effective otherwise. 'A healthy liver is able to rid the body of toxic substances and doesn't require detoxification,' says Kassier. The American Cancer Society has warned that chelation therapy can cause kidney damage, irregular heartbeat and even death.

## BLOOD IRRADIATION (BLOOD CLEANSING OR 'VAMPIRE THERAPY')

**WHAT IT IS** A little of your blood (around 35 to 200cc) is extracted (as in blood donation) and passed through a machine that exposes it to ultraviolet light to re-oxygenate it and purify it by breaking down bacteria and viruses, then re-infused. Some practitioners insert a laser in your nose instead, to irradiate blood passing through your nasal membrane.

**COST** About R1 500 per treatment.

**FOR** Practitioners say it helps increase energy, boost immunity, increase metabolism, improve skin conditions and reduce symptoms of allergies and conditions such as chronic fatigue syndrome. Most, including Wildervanck, are unclear how irradiating so little blood can actually achieve this, but suggest the dead pathogen particles may provide information to your immune system in a 'vaccination effect'.

**AGAINST** Critics say there are no randomised, placebo-controlled

trials to support it. 'The concept is laughable,' says Kassier.

## BIOPUNCTURE

**WHAT IT IS** Low doses of plant extracts (most often arnica, echinacea and camomile) mixed with glucose and sterile water are injected to help 'detoxify' the body and treat pain and inflammatory problems.

**COST** About R450 per treatment.

**FOR** The small doses stimulate your body's natural healing processes over a series of treatments, and help treat everything from sprains, strains, asthma, hay fever, eczema and migraines to irritable bowel syndrome and fibromyalgia, says Allem. Doses are too small for adverse effects, herbal preparations are safe, and needles used are small and painless.

**AGAINST** Critics say there is no scientific evidence that it works, and just because a product is 'natural' does not make it effective or safe – herbal preparations are not regulated for safety and potency. 'A functional liver and kidneys are all you need to protect the body under normal circumstances [with no alcohol or drug abuse],' says Kassier. ☘

## Before Trying Any Treatments

KEEP THIS IN MIND, SAYS DIETITIAN SUNA KASSIER:

⇒ **Most health problems** have a number of causes but if only the symptoms are treated, they're sure to return.

⇒ **In a fast-paced, quick-fix society** we want to believe complicated problems have simple solutions.

⇒ **The power of the mind** is strong: when you 'feel' an unproven remedy 'works', it could be the placebo effect.

⇒ **Celebrity endorsements** enhance the placebo effect.