

# Detoxify? Drink ginger? What to do after 10 days of bad air

November 20 2018, by Will Kane

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There's no need to detoxify your body after breathing polluted air, according to a UC Berkeley expert. Credit: Wikimedia Commons

As firefighters begin to gain control of the Camp Fire in Butte County and rain promises to wash away much of the unhealthy air in the Bay

Area, a question remains:

Is there any need to "detoxify" your body with certain nutrients or diets, as many Facebook posts or email forwards suggest?

The short answer is no, said John Balmes, a professor of environmental [health](#) sciences at UC Berkeley's School of Public Health and a pulmonologist at UCSF.

"There is no evidence or need for detoxification," he said.

Focus on "taking good care of your general health—eating well, sleeping well, exercising indoors until the air clears later this week," he said. "Keep eating fruits and vegetables, which contain antioxidants that protect against inhaled oxidant pollutants."

Advice flooding the internet that Bay Area residents do things like "load their diet with ginger" to clean out the bad [particulates](#) or "up their glutathione levels" by consuming more "broccoli, brussels sprouts, cabbage or cauliflower or other cruciferous vegetables" aren't backed by science, he said.

But that's not to say that the persistent smoke hasn't taken a mental toll.

"The [psychological effects](#) are more important to [healthy people](#) than the mild irritative symptoms that most of us have experienced," Balmes said. "Meditating or 'de-stressing' is much more important than eating ginger or breathing steam with thyme," he said.

It is doubtful 10 days of bad air in the Bay Area will have much of a long-term health impact for otherwise healthy people, he said, adding that that the smoky air could worsen existing health issues like asthma or heart disease.

"That's real," he said. "And people need to be taking care of those conditions as best they can."

Over the next few days, rain and a shift in wind are predicted to start cleaning up the microscopic smoke particles that have been hanging over the Bay Area since the Camp Fire raged through Paradise.

The [particulate matter](#) is so fine it never really settles on surfaces inside homes, making mopping or vacuuming for particulates unnecessary, Balmes said. Ash may float down onto cars parked outside, but those particles are generally too large to enter into the bloodstream through a person's lungs.

"Something I will do is go buy a [home](#) HEPA filter for the next time this happens," he said. "They work."

And there will be a next time, Balmes said. Drought, climate change and decades of poor forest management make it inevitable that large, catastrophic wildfires will continue to burn hundreds of thousands of acres of forests, destroy homes and pollute California.

"This should be a wake-up call that we need to get serious about climate change," he said. "It actually drives me a little crazy that everyone is worried about the health effects here, which are pretty minor if you're otherwise healthy, compared to the larger threats of [climate change](#), and poor forest management."

Provided by University of California - Berkeley

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