

Lactose Intolerance

What is it?

Lactose is a milk sugar. It's the main carbohydrate in milk products. Lactose intolerance is when there is little or no lactase enzyme in the intestines to digest or break lactose down into its simpler forms. This causes discomfort.

Lactose intolerance is very common. Not that many people keep the ability to digest large amounts of milk products throughout their life. It is estimated that 70-90% of Asian, Black, Native American and Mediterranean adults lack this enzyme. Most infants can digest milk and other dairy products, but children begin to lose their lactase enzyme between 3-7 years of age.

What are the symptoms?

Bloating, gas, abdominal pain, nausea and diarrhea are just some of the symptoms that may occur after eating milk products. Symptoms usually occur 20 minutes to several hours after eating dairy products. The severity of symptoms varies greatly from person to person.

There are huge differences in the amount of lactose that will cause people problems, and lactose content varies greatly from person to person. One person might be able to drink a glass of milk, while another might not be able to even eat bread made with milk as an ingredient. Given these differences, it is important for each person to assess his/her responses to a variety of dairy products. Dairy intake has to be determined by the individual's response.

What is the treatment?

Since lactose is the culprit, eliminating dairy products from the diet will provide relief. Some prepared foods may have whey, curd, milk powder or milk solids, all of which contain lactose. Read the ingredient lists carefully. Foods such as yogurt, acidophilus milk, buttermilk and aged cheeses may be better tolerated. In really severe cases, all milk products must be avoided. Then it is necessary to get Calcium and Vitamin D from other sources. A supplement with Calcium and Vitamin D may be taken, up to 1200 mg of calcium per day. Avoid supplements that get their calcium from oyster shell, bone meal or dolomite, because they might be contaminated with lead.

Another option is to use Lactaid tablets or drops (before eating or drinking dairy products). Lactaid is available over the counter in drug stores. You can also buy milk that is pretreated with Lactaid, as well as non dairy milk alternatives like Soy Milk, Rice Milk, Vitamite, Soy Dream, etc.



A service of the Klotz Student Health Center's Health Promotion Dept.

For more information,
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