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Getting Enough Calcium , What is Lactose Intolerance?

Michigan State University

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Getting Enough Calcium

What Is Lactose Intolerance?

“I get cramps and gas after I drink milk. Why doesn't milk seem to agree with me?”

You may be having those symptoms because you are not completely digesting lactose, the main sugar in milk. This condition is called lactose intolerance.

Lactose intolerance occurs in individuals who have low levels of lactase, the enzyme that digests milk sugar in your intestines. When milk sugar is not completely digested, some people experience abdominal cramps, gas and diarrhea.

Lactose intolerance is a relatively common problem among adults of African, Asian, Native American or Mediterranean heritage. About 75 percent of adults worldwide have lactose intolerance to some degree. Those who are not affected are primarily people of northern European ancestry.

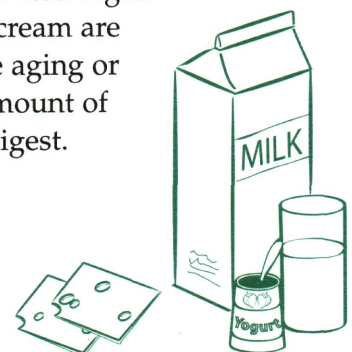
Some people blame lactose intolerance for stomach or bowel problems that may have actually been caused by something else. If you have these symptoms, talk to your doctor or a dietitian before you cut out milk and dairy products.

“Does this mean that I am allergic to milk?”

No. Lactose intolerance is an inability to completely digest the milk sugar, whereas milk allergy is an immune system reaction to the protein in milk. Milk allergy is much less common than lactose intolerance.

“If I am lactose intolerant, does it mean that I can't have any milk or dairy products?”

Most people with lactose intolerance are able to consume small amounts of milk without symptoms. Try drinking milk with meals in servings of 1 cup or less. Aged cheeses, yogurt, buttermilk, and sour cream are usually tolerated better than milk. The aging or fermenting process has reduced the amount of lactose in cheese, making it easier to digest.



“I’ve seen ‘lactose-reduced’ milks in some stores. Are they as nutritious?”

Yes. Lactose-reduced milk has been treated to predigest the milk sugar but still contains the same amounts of protein, vitamins and minerals as regular milk. “Lactose-reduced” cottage cheese and yogurt are also available in some stores.

“What about special products to reduce the lactose in milk? What do they do?”

Certain non-prescription products available in liquid or tablet form — such as Lactaid® and Dairy Ease® — contain the enzyme lactase.* When added to milk, these products digest most of the lactose. There are also lactase enzyme tablets and drops that you can take before you eat dairy products to help your body digest lactose.

“What should I do if I think I am lactose intolerant?”

The severity of lactose intolerance is a very individual matter. Most people with lactose intolerance can have some milk and dairy products if they are careful about the amount and timing of intakes.

- Use yogurt and naturally low-lactose dairy products such as hard cheeses.
- Drink milk with meals in servings of 1 cup or less.
- Try “lactose-reduced” milk, cottage cheese and yogurt.
- Take lactase enzyme tablets or add lactase enzyme drops to dairy products.
- Seek medical advice, especially if symptoms persist after you make these changes.

* Reference to products is not intended to endorse them, nor to exclude others that may be similar. Examples are listed as a convenience to readers. Follow label directions.

This information is not intended to substitute for medical advice, nor does it cover all issues. For your specific needs, check with a medical professional.

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