

Healthy Living with Lactose Intolerance

Your doctor has diagnosed your inability to digest lactose containing foods by measuring your breath hydrogen levels. The following information will help you understand and manage your diet while living a healthy, normal life.

What is Lactose Intolerance?

Lactose intolerance is the inability to digest lactose, the sugar found in milk and other dairy products such as butter and yogurt.

Lactose intolerance is caused by the body's inability to produce the enzyme lactase. Lactase breaks down lactose into simpler forms of sugar that can be absorbed and utilized by the body for energy.

Lactase deficiency usually develops over time. After the age of 2 yrs., lactase production naturally decreases. Also, certain digestive diseases or injury to the small intestine can reduce the amount of enzymes produced. And, in rare cases, some people are born without the ability to produce any lactase.

Symptoms

Lactase deficiency can cause GI symptoms such as nausea, cramps, bloating, gas and diarrhea. The severity of symptoms depends on the amount of lactose an individual can tolerate. Symptoms begin 30 min. to 2 hours after consuming lactose containing foods.

Treatment

Lactose intolerance is easy to treat. Successful treatment is achieved simply by controlling your symptoms. Since it is not possible to make the body produce more lactase enzyme, your symptoms can be reduced by limiting the amount of dairy you consume or by taking lactase enzymes.

Most people do not have to avoid lactose completely. They can discover through trial

and error the amount of lactose their body can digest, without producing symptoms. One person may be able to have one glass of milk and another person may not be able to drink milk at all, but can eat cheese without getting GI symptoms.

Lactase supplements can be taken to assist with the digestion of dairy. They are available in liquid or tablet form without a prescription. When liquid drops are added to milk the lactose content is reduced by 70-90%. The tablets, when taken just before eating, help digest solid foods that contain lactose such as cheese and ice cream. Lactose-reduced milk is also available at grocery stores.

A Nutrition Balancing Act

Dairy products are a major source of calcium and other nutrients in the diet. A deficiency of calcium may lead to *osteoporosis* or thin, fragile bones that break easily. Thus, a concern for both children and adults with lactose intolerance is getting enough calcium in the diet.

The Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA) for calcium is 1,000 mg per day. Some experts believe this is too low, and suggest that post-menopausal women not taking estrogen need as much as 1,500 mg of calcium daily. The RDA for adult men is 1,000 mg per day and 1,200 mg per day for men over the age of 50.

It is important to make sure that your daily diet includes adequate calcium, even if you are not consuming dairy products.

Many foods are high in calcium and contain no lactose. Leafy greens and fish with soft, edible bones are excellent examples. To help in planning a high-calcium, low-lactose diet, the following chart lists the calcium and lactose content of common foods.

Calcium & Lactose Content of Foods

Vegetables (1 cup cooked)

	Calcium	Lactose
Broccoli	94-177 mg	0g
Bok Choy	158 mg	0g
Collard Greens	148-357mg	0g
Kale	94-179mg	0g
Turnip greens	194-249mg	0g

Dairy Products

Ice cream (8oz)	176mg	6-7g
Milk (8oz)	291-316mg	12g
Processed Cheese (1oz)	159-219mg	2-3g
Sour Cream (4oz)	134mg	4-5g
Plain Yogurt (8oz)	274-415mg	12g

Fish/Seafood

Raw Oysters (1 cup)	226mg	0g
Salmon (3oz w/bones)	167mg	0g
Sardines (3oz)	371mg	0g
Shrimp (3oz)	98mg	0g

Other

Molasses (2T)	274mg	0g
Tofu (3oz)	225mg	0g

Many can eat yogurt without symptoms, even though it contains lactose. It is thought that the bacterial cultures used in making yogurt produce the lactase required for proper digestion.

Some vegetables that are high in calcium such as Swiss chard, spinach and rhubarb are not listed because they contain *oxalates* which interfere with calcium absorption. It is also important to note that calcium is absorbed and used only when there is enough vitamin D in the body. A balanced diet and daily exposure to sunlight should provide an adequate supply of vitamin D.

Watch for Hidden Lactose

Although milk products are the only natural sources of lactose, they are often added to processed foods including:

- Mixes for pancakes, biscuits, cookies, etc.
- Packaged breakfast cereals
- Instant potatoes, soups, and breakfast drinks
- Bread and other baked goods
- Margarine
- Lunch meats (other than kosher)
- Salad dressings
- Candies and other snacks

Ingredients containing lactose to watch out for on food labels are whey, curds, milk by-products, dry milk solids, and non-fat dry milk powder.

Also, some products labeled non-dairy such as powdered coffee creamer and whipped topping may contain milk products. Many over the counter products and prescription drugs may contain lactose. Your pharmacist can help you avoid such products.

Summary

Lactose intolerance does not pose a serious threat to good health. Many with the condition will be able to enjoy milk, ice cream and other dairy products when taken in moderation and when eaten in the same meal with a variety of other foods.

Many foods provide the calcium and other nutrients the body needs, even when it is necessary to limit your dairy intake. Carefully choosing your foods is the key to reducing symptoms and protecting future health.

Talk to your doctor to find out if calcium supplementation is recommended for you. You may also wish to consult with a dietitian to assist you with meal options and to assure adequate nutrient intake.