Lactose Intolerance: 
Do Dairy Products Upset Your Body?

What is Lactose Intolerance?

People who suffer from an upset stomach after ingesting milk or other dairy products are frequently lactose intolerant. What does this mean? The sugar found in dairy products is called lactose. Lactose intolerance is the inability to digest this form of sugar. This is because your body has a shortage of lactase, the enzyme used to digest lactose. The lactase enzyme is normally produced by cells that line the small intestine. While the effects of lactose intolerance may be uncomfortable, they’re not dangerous.

According to The American Gastroenterological Association, close to 50 million Americans are lactose intolerant. Lactose intolerance also varies for different ethnic groups; on average, 80% of Asian and Native Americans, 75% of African Americans, 51% of Hispanic Americans, and 21% of Caucasian Americans have some degree of lactose intolerance.

Common Symptoms

People with lactose intolerance may experience nausea, cramps, bloating, gas, and/or diarrhea. The symptoms typically begin about 30 minutes to 2 hours after eating/drinking milk or other lactose-rich foods. Some people have a mild reaction, whereas others have more difficulty.

Managing Lactose Intolerance

Dairy foods such as milk, cheese and ice cream contain the largest amount of lactose and are therefore the biggest culprits for causing lactose intolerance symptoms. Other non-dairy products that also contain lactose such as bread and other baked goods, instant potatoes and soups, lunch meats (non-kosher), salad dressings, candies, pancake, cookie and biscuit mixes, and processed breakfast cereals may cause symptoms in extremely sensitive individuals. Most people can tolerate small amounts of lactose with meals. Eating a variety of foods, including fruits, vegetables, whole grain products, lean meats, fish and dairy products will ensure that you get the nutrients, vitamins and minerals your body needs.

A major concern for lactose intolerant women and children is getting enough calcium. Calcium is needed for the bones to grow and maintain strength throughout life. Dairy foods provide an excellent source of calcium. If you decide to limit your intake of dairy foods, make sure you include non-dairy sources of calcium in your diet or take a calcium supplement.
Vegetable sources of calcium include kale, collard, turnip and beet greens, okra and broccoli. Other good sources of calcium include salmon/sardines with bones, tofu, fortified orange juice, fortified cereals, figs, white beans and fortified soy milk. Yogurt is also a very good source of calcium. Even though yogurt contains lactose, it also contains active yogurt cultures, making it easier to digest. Remember, the body needs plenty of calcium in order to stay healthy and grow.

**Suggestions for Controlling Lactose Intolerance**

You can take charge of your lactose intolerance! Someone who is lactose intolerant does not have to completely cut out dairy products. However, certain changes in your diet may be enough to combat your symptoms. Try these tips:

- **Smaller servings.** Drink milk in servings of one cup or less so the body has less lactose to digest at once. Same thing goes for other lactose-rich foods.
- **Meal complement.** Eat dairy foods with or after meals instead of alone or on an empty stomach. Solid foods slow digestion, which makes it easier for the body to process lactose.
- **Cheese selection.** Eat harder cheeses, such as cheddar, swiss and parmesan, which are low in lactose.
- **Enzyme tablets.** If you are unable to tolerate milk even in small doses, take lactase enzyme tablets, such as Lactaid or Dairy Ease, before drinking or eating dairy products. The enzymes will help break down the lactose in your body.
- **Enough calcium.** Maintain your calcium intake with alternative sources, such as green vegetables or fortified products such as soy milk, orange juice and cereals, and supplements.
- **Lactose reduction.** Limit or omit any food you notice your body cannot tolerate. Simply taking smaller portions of these foods can help reduce your symptoms.

**Get As Much As You Can**

Research indicates that completely cutting out lactose from your diet can actually be a bad idea. When the body doesn’t receive any lactose, it responds by producing less of the lactase enzyme. Your body needs to maintain some level of lactase in order to digest foods that contain even just a little lactose. **To continue production of lactase, you should consume as much lactose as you can tolerate.** In fact, research suggests that people with lactose intolerance who include some milk and other lactose-rich foods in their diet may actually improve their tolerance to lactose. So, remember to get as much lactose as you can without making yourself feel uncomfortable!