

## Problems digesting dairy products?

Does your stomach churn after you drink milk? Do you have diarrhea soon afterward? If so, you may be lactose intolerant.

The National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK) estimates that 30 to 50 million Americans are lactose intolerant.

Being lactose intolerant means you can't digest lactose—the natural sugar found in milk and other dairy products. People who cannot digest lactose have a shortage, or deficiency, of an enzyme called lactase, which is produced in the small intestine. Lactase breaks down milk sugar into two simpler forms of sugar, which are then absorbed into the bloodstream.

### ***Intolerance is not an allergy***

Lactose intolerance is not the same as a milk allergy, says Kavita Dada, Pharm.D., a senior health promotion officer in the Food and Drug Administration's (FDA's) Division of Drug Information. "For most people with lactase deficiency, it's a discomfort."

But a food allergy—an abnormal response to a food triggered by the immune system—can be life-threatening. People with food allergies must avoid certain foods altogether. People with food intolerances can often eat small amounts of the offending foods without having symptoms.

### ***Symptoms***

When there is not enough lactase to digest the lactose in the foods a person eats or drinks, the person may have

- gas
- stomach cramps
- bloating
- nausea
- diarrhea

These symptoms occur within 30 minutes to two hours after consuming food containing lactose. Some illnesses can cause these same problems, but a health care professional can do tests to see if the problems are caused by lactose intolerance or by another condition.

### ***Managing lactose intolerance***

There is no treatment to make the body produce more lactase enzyme, but the symptoms of lactose intolerance can be controlled through diet.

Most older children and adults do not have to avoid lactose completely. People have different levels of tolerance to lactose. Some people might be able to have a tablespoon of milk in a cup of coffee with little or no discomfort. Others have reactions that are so bad they stop drinking milk entirely. Some people who cannot drink milk may be able to eat ice cream and yogurt—which have less lactose than milk—without symptoms. They may also be able to consume a lactose-containing product in smaller amounts at any one time.

Dietary supplements with lactase enzyme are available to help people digest foods that contain lactose. However, the FDA has not formally evaluated the effectiveness of these products, and you may want to ask your doctor if these supplements are right for you.

***Testing for lactose intolerance***

A doctor can usually determine if you are lactose intolerant by taking a medical history. In some cases, the doctor may perform tests to help confirm the diagnosis. A simple way to test at home is to exclude all lactose-containing products from your diet for two weeks to see if the symptoms go away, and then reintroduce them slowly. If the symptoms return, then you most likely are lactose intolerant. But you may still want to see your doctor to make sure that you are lactose intolerant and do not have a milk allergy or another digestive problem.

For additional information visit

<http://digestive.niddk.nih.gov/ddiseases/pubs/lactoseintolerance/>.