

Lactose Intolerance

For many children, a summer sundae or a cool glass of milk at lunchtime means an afternoon of cramps, gas, and diarrhea. If this happens to your child, he or she may be one of the more than 30 million Americans who has lactose intolerance. This condition is common in Americans with Asian, African, and Mediterranean family origins. Across the world, about 70% of all people may have some degree of lactose intolerance. After a bout with an intestinal infection that caused diarrhea, many otherwise normal children will have some period of relative lactose intolerance....and all of the symptoms that go with it.

In this condition, the body manufactures too little lactase, an enzyme found in the intestines. Lactase breaks down lactose, a sugar that's found in milk and milk products such as ice cream and cheese. When lactose isn't broken down in the intestines, it ferments and causes gas cramps, bloating, and loose stools a few hours after eating dairy foods. Some children, alternatively, become constipated.

Fortunately, lactose intolerance is relatively easy to treat. No treatment exists to improve the body's ability to produce lactase, but symptoms can be controlled through diet. Most older children and adults need not avoid lactose completely, but individuals differ in the amounts of lactose they can handle. Dietary control of lactose intolerance depends on each person's learning through trial and error how much lactose he or she can handle. Many will be able to enjoy milk, ice cream, and other such products if they take them in small amounts or eat other food at the same time. For those who react to very small amounts of lactose or have trouble limiting their intake of foods that contain lactose, lactase enzymes are available without a prescription. Lact-Aid and Lactrase are two brand names, for example. These are safe for children and may be used as needed. One form is a liquid for use with milk. A few drops are added to a quart of milk, and after 24 hours in the refrigerator, the lactose content is reduced by 70 percent. A more recent development is a chewable lactase enzyme tablet that helps people digest solid foods that contain lactose. Three to six tablets are taken just before a meal or snack. Lactose-reduced milk and other products are available at many supermarkets. Although milk and foods made from milk are the only natural sources, lactose is often added to prepared foods such as luncheon meats. People with very low tolerance for lactose should know about the many food products that may contain lactose, even in small amounts.

Milk and other dairy products are a major source of nutrients in the American diet. The most important of these nutrients is calcium. Growing children who must avoid milk and foods made with milk can meet most of their special dietary needs by eating green vegetables (good luck!), fish, and other calcium-rich foods that are free of lactose. Calcium enriched orange juice is a good choice at breakfast.