

Lactose Intolerance

presented by the Salem Evening News

Feel like you love milk and dairy products but they don't love you? You're not alone. An estimated 50 million Americans report some sort of intolerance to dairy products, and a whopping 75 percent of the world's population may be lactose intolerant (especially people of Asian, African, Native American, Hispanic and Jewish descent).

Lactose intolerance refers to the body's inability to digest lactose, which is the sugar found naturally in milk products. People who are missing an enzyme called lactase do not have the ability to digest this sugar. If no lactase enzyme is present, bacteria in the gut break down the lactose, which can result in cramping, gas, diarrhea, nausea and GI upset. Symptoms usually begin anywhere from 15 minutes to 2 hours after ingesting milk, and may range from mild to severe discomfort.

While nearly all humans are able to digest milk as infants and children (Mother Nature designed us to be able to digest breast milk), many people lose their ability to produce lactase as they grow older. This may explain why people who were able to chug a glass of milk with abandon as a child are now only able to tolerate milk in small doses, or perhaps not at all.

The good news is that most people who are lactose intolerant can usually tolerate smaller amounts of dairy in their diet. Milk in coffee or cereal, for example, may be tolerated. To reduce or eliminate symptoms, try drinking milk in smaller servings (1 cup or less), and combine milk products with other foods rather than having on an empty stomach.

Choosing dairy products which have a lower level of lactose present is another strategy for eating dairy without fuss; yogurt with active cultures, cottage cheese and aged cheeses (such as Swiss, cheddar or parmesan) are usually better tolerated because they contain less lactose than other dairy products such as milk and ice cream.

In addition, there are a variety of products on the market nowadays that can help you enjoy milk while remaining symptom-free. Lactase supplements are available (which provide the lactase enzyme necessary to break down milk sugar), as are milk products which already have lactase added to them, such as Lactaid. Adding lactase enzyme drops to regular milk is another way to avoid stomach upset.

If you think you may be lactose intolerant, don't just begin randomly cutting out foods from your diet. Instead try keeping a food diary, recording everything you eat and drink; note when a reaction occurs, and look for food which may be repeat offenders.



The best way to diagnose for lactose intolerance involves a definitive test by your health practitioner, usually in the form of a breath hydrogen test, stool sample, or blood test.

If you are a strict avoider of dairy products, remember to get a good source of calcium from other food choices. Things like almonds, broccoli, kale, tofu (processed with calcium citrate) and calcium-fortified orange juice are all good sources. In addition, be sure you are getting enough vitamin D, which is important to help metabolize calcium in the body- rich sources include fatty fish such as salmon, egg yolks and fortified breakfast cereals.

In addition to proceeding with caution when it comes to dairy products, be a label sleuth to see which foods contain dairy. Words such as "lactose", "whey", "nonfat milk solids", "malted milk" and "buttermilk" indicate that milk may be present. Foods such as breads, dry cereals, instant soups, breakfast drinks and milk chocolate usually contain small amounts of lactose. Non dairy creamers and even some medications contain lactose, so read labels carefully. But remember, for most people an intolerance to lactose doesn't mean you have to steer clear of dairy products entirely; experiment with which foods works best for you, and in which amounts, and you should still be able to boast that you "Got Milk".