

Understanding Lactose Intolerance

Lactose intolerance means your body has trouble digesting a sugar called lactose. Lactose is found in milk and dairy products. When your body cannot break down lactose, it can cause stomach problems. It can make you feel sick after eating or drinking dairy.



People with lactose intolerance feel sick after having dairy foods or drinks.

How Do People Get Lactose Intolerance?

Most people develop lactose intolerance over time. As people age, their bodies stop making enough of an enzyme called lactase. This enzyme helps break down lactose so your body can use it. Without the enzyme in the stomach, lactose passes further into the intestines and causes symptoms.

Some people are born with lactose intolerance. Others can develop it after having certain illnesses or infections that affect the stomach or intestines. It is common in some ethnic groups, like people of Asian, African, Native American, or Hispanic backgrounds.

Symptoms

If you have lactose intolerance, your symptoms most often start within a few hours after eating or drinking dairy. They can include:

- Bloating, or feeling full in the stomach

- Gas and stomach cramps
- Loose or watery stools
- Nausea, or feeling like you might vomit
- Stomach pain or discomfort

Diagnosis

Your care team will ask about your symptoms. They may suggest tests to find out if you are lactose intolerant. Common tests include a breath test or eating a small amount of lactose to see how your body reacts.

Treatment

You cannot cure lactose intolerance, but you can manage it. Here is what you can do:

- **Avoid foods with lactose:** These include milk, cheese, ice cream, and other dairy products.
- **Limit dairy foods:** You may be able to eat small amounts of dairy without symptoms.
- **Use lactase supplements:** These pills or drops help your body digest lactose better. Take them just before eating dairy.
- **Try dairy alternatives:** Use plant-based milks, like almond, soy, or rice milk. Lactose-free milk is also available.
- **Eat foods that do not have lactose:** Fruits, vegetables, grains, meats, and dairy-free snacks are all naturally lactose-free.



There are many lactose-free milk substitutes you can try.

Outlook

Most people can live normally by avoiding or limiting dairy. Talk to your care team about your diet. They may recommend calcium and vitamin D supplements if you are strictly avoiding milk products. Calcium and vitamin D are important for healthy bones.

Your care team can help you find tasty, healthy foods that do not cause problems.

When to Call Your Care Team

Call your care team if:

- You have severe stomach pain or cramps.
- You have ongoing diarrhea or nausea.
- You feel weak or dizzy often.
- You are unsure about what foods you can eat.
- You have questions about using supplements or managing your diet.

When to Call 911 or Go to the Emergency Room

Get help right away if:

- You become very dehydrated from diarrhea or vomiting.



- You feel very weak, dizzy, or faint.
- You start to feel numb or have trouble walking.
- You have severe stomach pain that does not go away.

Thank You for Choosing Us

Thank you for trusting us with your care. We are here to support you and want you to feel your best. Contact us with any questions.

IF YOU HAVE A MEDICAL EMERGENCY, CALL 911 OR GO TO THE EMERGENCY ROOM.

The information presented is intended for general information and educational purposes. It is not intended to replace the advice of your health care provider. Contact your health care provider if you believe you have a health problem.

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