

LACTOSE INTOLERANCE

(Milk Intolerance; Lactase Deficiency)



BASIC INFORMATION

DESCRIPTION

Difficulty digesting cow's milk. Lactose is the primary sugar in milk. Lactose intolerance occurs in 75% of the black population, 90% of Asians or American Indians, and less than 20% of Caucasians of northwest European origin. It can affect any age group.

FREQUENT SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

• Symptoms will vary depending on the amount of lactose each person can tolerate. Symptoms occur about 30 minutes to 2 hours after eating or drinking foods that contain lactose. They may be mild to more severe.

In children:

- Foamy diarrhea with diaper rash.
- Vomiting (sometimes).
- Slow weight gain, growth, and development.

In adults:

- Rumbling stomach sounds, stomach cramps, and diarrhea.
- Gas and bloating.
- Nausea.

CAUSES

- Deficiency or absence of the enzyme lactase. Lactase is needed to digest all milk except mother's milk. Without it, sugars in milk absorb fluid and cause diarrhea. Some infants are born with the disorder, but lactose intolerance usually develops in adulthood.
- Temporary lactose intolerance can occur in an infant after a severe case of gastroenteritis (stomach flu) that irritates the intestinal lining.

RISK INCREASES WITH

Family history of lactase enzyme deficiency.

PREVENTIVE MEASURES

Cannot be prevented at present. If you are pregnant and there is a history of lactose intolerance in your family, consider breast-feeding your baby. If not, you may need a non-milk formula.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

There is no cure for this disorder, but it does not cause a threat to good health. Symptoms can be controlled with diet changes. Symptoms may worsen at times for unknown reasons.

POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

Calcium deficiency and weak bones (rare).



DIAGNOSIS & TREATMENT

GENERAL MEASURES

- Your health care provider may do a physical exam. A trial period of no dairy products is usually recommended to see if symptoms stop.

• Medical tests may be done. For older children or adults, a hydrogen breath test or lactose absorption test indicate whether lactose is not being absorbed in the digestive tract. A stool acidity exam may be done. It can be used for infants or young children.

• Treatment involves diet changes. Using lactase enzymes is also an option.

• To learn more: National Digestive Diseases Clearinghouse, 2 Information Way, Bethesda, MD 20892; (800) 891-5389; website: www.digestive.niddic.nih.gov.

MEDICATIONS

• The enzyme lactase is available without a prescription. It can be taken as a tablet or as a liquid that is added to milk and milk products. It acts in much the same way as the naturally occurring enzyme does.

• Calcium supplements may be recommended.

• Some prescription and nonprescription drugs contain lactose as an ingredient. These include some birth-control pills and antacids. They may affect people who have severe lactose intolerance.

ACTIVITY

No limits.

DIET

• If the condition is present at birth, an infant formula that contains little or no lactose, such as a soybean-based formula, will be recommended.

• If the lactose intolerance is short-term and caused by gastroenteritis, a substitute formula is needed for a short time. Cow's milk can be introduced again later.

• Older persons with lactose intolerance should reduce or restrict milk and milk products, such as cheese and ice cream. Lactose-free milk is available.

• Yogurt and fermented products such as hard cheese are often tolerated better than milk.

• Read food labels with care. Avoid products that contain milk, lactose, milk sugar, whey, curds, milk by-products, dry milk solids, and nonfat dry milk powder.



NOTIFY OUR OFFICE IF

• You or your child has symptoms of lactose intolerance.

• Infant fails to gain weight or refuses food or formula.

• Vomiting or diarrhea occurs.

• A milk-free diet doesn't relieve symptoms.

Special notes:

More notes on the back of this page