

# Living Well *with* Lactose Intolerance

Living with lactose intolerance can be uncomfortable at the least and painful at the most. It is not surprising that you might want to avoid dairy foods as a result. However, dairy foods are one of the best sources of calcium, vitamin D and other nutrients that our bodies need for a healthy diet. They also taste great! There are ways to get the health and taste benefits of dairy foods while living with lactose intolerance.

## QUESTION: What is lactose intolerance?

### ANSWER: Lactose intolerance is a type of food sensitivity.

If you have lactose intolerance, your body can't break down the naturally-occurring sugar, called lactose, in milk.

Symptoms include stomach cramps, bloating, gas and diarrhea. When people have these symptoms, they often assume they have lactose intolerance. But it is important to visit your doctor to get a confirmed diagnosis since these symptoms can occur with other conditions, too.

## Q: What is the difference between lactose intolerance and a milk or dairy allergy?

A:

	Lactose Intolerance	Milk (Dairy) Allergy
<b>Cause</b>	An inability of the body to digest lactose (the sugar found in milk) due to too little of an enzyme in the body called lactase	An immune system reaction to the protein in milk
<b>Onset</b>	Typically starts in the teens or during adulthood; rare in young children	Typically occurs in young children, many of whom outgrow the allergy by age two or three
<b>Severity</b>	Causes discomfort; milk and dairy products can still be eaten in moderation, depending on individual response	Can be life threatening; milk and dairy foods should be avoided completely
<b>Symptoms</b>	Gas, nausea, diarrhea, stomach cramps, bloating, fullness	Whole body response: Hives, rash; stuffy, itching nose; watery eyes; diarrhea, stomach cramps; vomiting; swelling

## Q: Are there any dairy foods I can still eat?

A: **Yes!** Many dairy foods are naturally low in lactose and typically don't cause any symptoms. These include:



Hard and aged cheeses, such as cheddar, Colby, Monterey Jack, Parmesan and Swiss



Yogurt with live and active cultures that can help break down lactose, making it easier to digest



Lactose-free milk, which is real milk with the same nutrients as regular milk

Try adding a small amount of milk or other dairy foods slowly over time. Drink milk with other types of foods as part of a meal, which gives your body more time to digest the lactose.





**Q: Why should I bother with dairy foods? I don't want to risk having these symptoms!**

**A: Milk—including lactose-free milk—contains nine essential nutrients that are good for your entire body.** These nutrients include calcium and vitamin D, vitamin A, protein, riboflavin, phosphorus, niacin, vitamin B12, and pantothenic acid.

It is difficult to get enough of some of these nutrients from other foods. For example, you would have to eat 10 cups of raw spinach to get the same amount of calcium as one eight-ounce glass of milk.

Alternatives to cow's milk, such as almond, coconut, and soy beverages, are more processed and usually contain more than eight added ingredients compared to cow's milk, which has only three ingredients: milk, vitamins A and D.

Also, some studies suggest that regular exposure to lactose may increase a person's tolerance to dairy foods, which is another reason not to give up dairy foods in your diet.

**Q: How do I know if my child is lactose intolerant?**

**A: Symptoms are similar in children as they are in adults.** Like with adults, it is important to have a doctor confirm the condition in children to ensure there isn't anything else going on. For children who develop lactose intolerance, often times it doesn't start to appear until late adolescence. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, it's important that children with lactose intolerance still eat dairy products to get enough calcium and vitamin D for growing bodies and bone health.



**Resources:**

National Dairy Council, [www.nationaldairycouncil.org](http://www.nationaldairycouncil.org)

National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Disease, [www.niddk.nih.gov](http://www.niddk.nih.gov)

Suchy FJ, Brannon PM, Carpenter TO, Fernandez JR, Gilsanz V, Gould JB, et al. National Institutes of Health Consensus Development Conference: Lactose Intolerance and Health. *Ann Intern Med.*;152:792-796. doi: 10.7326/0003-4819-152-12-201006150-00248

## How Much Dairy Do You Need?

The U.S. Dietary Guidelines recommend that children eat 2-3 cups and adults eat 3 cups of dairy foods per day for a healthy eating pattern.

What does that look like for someone with lactose intolerance?



**1 cup of  
lactose-free milk**



**1 ½ ounces  
sharp cheddar cheese**  
*(about the size of 3 playing dice)*



**8 ounces of yogurt with  
live and active cultures**

For more information about lactose intolerance, including recipes using lactose-free dairy foods, visit [www.MilkMeansMore.org](http://www.MilkMeansMore.org).

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