

Six Strategies to Manage Lactose Intolerance and Your Health

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Many Americans, like myself, enjoy ice cream, cheese and the occasional glass of chocolate milk. But if you're **lactose intolerant**, you've probably noticed a few symptoms show up when you consume them.

While you may think you need to avoid dairy altogether, the good news is, you don't have to. The latest evidence suggests that there are proven ways to minimize the symptoms of lactose intolerance while avoiding unintentional consequences, such as nutritional deficiencies.

What is Lactose?

Lactose is a disaccharide made up of glucose and galactose. It is the main carbohydrate found in mammalian milk, such as breast milk and cow's milk. Digestion of lactose occurs in the intestine and relies on the presence of the enzyme lactase, which splits lactose into glucose and galactose.

What is Lactose Intolerance?

When lactase enzyme is absent or in short supply, the digestion of lactose is incomplete, causing symptoms of lactose intolerance to appear. These symptoms include gas, bloating, cramping and/or diarrhea.

The most common form of lactose intolerance is in adults and is caused by a genetic trait, resulting in diminishing lactase enzyme production as individuals age. It's also seen in premature infants, who have not fully matured, and therefore produce inadequate levels of lactase enzyme in the intestine. Last, lactose intolerance may be caused by injury or diseases affecting the small bowel of the intestine, which results in less lactase enzyme available for proper digestion of lactose.

Is It Lactose Intolerance or Something Else?

Some individuals may have other gastrointestinal conditions, like Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS), which involves intolerance to a range of digestible carbohydrates, including fructose (fruit sugars), lactose, and other sugar compounds. The symptoms of lactose intolerance and IBS can overlap.

What Can I Do to Reduce Lactose Intolerance?

There are several proven strategies to reduce the symptoms of lactose intolerance. In lactose intolerant folks, studies have shown the amount of lactose consumed in one sitting, or dose, affects the onset and severity of symptoms. Several other studies have looked at the minimum amount of lactose which can be tolerated without symptoms, concluding that most lactose intolerant individuals are able to tolerate about 12-13 gm of lactose, which is the amount in a cup of milk.¹

Another strategy is to eat lactose-containing foods with meals. The presence of other nutrients from food, such as protein, fat and carbohydrate, can slow digestion in the stomach, thus delaying the entrance of lactose into the small intestine.

Last, choosing fermented foods which have a lower lactose content, like yogurt or kefir, can help. This is due to the presence of beneficial bacteria which convert lactose into lactic acid, reducing the overall lactose content.

For more on fermented foods, go to *6 Kid-Friendly Fermented Food You Can Find in the Fridge*.

💡 *While you may think you need to avoid dairy altogether, the good news is, you don't have to. 🌱*

Should I Cut Out Dairy If I'm Lactose Intolerant?

It's natural to think one should eliminate dairy if it is producing undesirable symptoms. Yet, many experts acknowledge the main health impact of lactose intolerance is the withholding of milk and dairy products. As such, the avoidance of milk and dairy foods for lactose intolerance is no longer recommended.¹

For children, the use of dairy foods is an important source of nutrients for bone growth and development.² Nutrients in dairy foods, particularly calcium, vitamin D (in milk) and protein, as well as vitamin A, potassium, zinc and magnesium, have an important role in the development of bone and its health across the lifespan. Additionally, dairy foods are widely available and an affordable, nutrient-dense choice for many families.

If you enjoy dairy foods, there are several ways you can keep eating them! My advice is to find a combination of strategies that work for you.

6 Strategies for Managing Lactose Intolerance and Your Health

The overall goals for managing lactose intolerance are to minimize the symptoms, improve the overall nutrient quality of the diet, and avoid deficiencies.

Here are 6 research-based strategies to help you live a full, healthy life without sacrificing your enjoyment of dairy foods.

1) Use lactose-free or low-lactose dairy products.

Lactose-free milk has been treated during production with lactase enzyme, allowing consumers to get the exact same nutritional benefits of milk, without the lactose. Lactose can also be removed from milk using ultra-filtration. During this process, milk sugar (lactose) is removed while maintaining the rest of the nutritional profile with the exception of protein and calcium. Ultra-filtration increases the protein and calcium content.

2) Take an enzyme replacement when you consume dairy foods.

Lactase enzymes, available over-the-counter and in gel, liquid, capsules or tablet form, can be taken just before consuming dairy products or while eating them to reduce symptoms of intolerance.

3) Select aged cheeses.

Hard, aged cheeses are known to have lower lactose content. Try cheddar, aged parmesan or swiss cheese.

4) Eat more fermented foods.

Yogurt, kefir and other fermented foods contain healthy bacteria that help maintain a healthy gut flora. Yogurt is also a source of probiotics, which the bulk of studies show a positive effect on gut health.

5) Incorporate more nutrient-dense plant foods.

Dark green, leafy vegetables, beans and legumes can provide additional sources of calcium, however they are not as bioavailable, or readily absorbed and utilized in the body, as dairy sources of calcium.

If you choose to use plant-based milks as a substitute for dairy milk, be aware of the following:

- They tend to be low in protein and fat which are key nutrients required for growth in children
- They are supplemented with added nutrients and may include additives to improve consistency
- The calorie content may be low, especially for younger children
- Flavored versions (e.g., vanilla) contain added sugar

Non-dairy drinks are not recommended

for children under age five due to their nutritional inadequacy. Only cow and soy milk are considered acceptable for this age group.³ If your child has a milk and soy allergy, talk with your healthcare provider for an appropriate beverage substitution.

6) Train your gut to adapt to lactose.

Start with one ounce of milk and gradually increase to 8 ounces. Serve milk with meals and try full fat milk to slow down digestion in the stomach and emptying into the intestine. Consume small amounts of milk daily to build your tolerance to lactose.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Many Americans are lactose intolerant, but most can tolerate 12-13 grams which is the amount in a cup of milk.
- Fermented foods like yogurt, kefir, and hard cheeses (cheddar, swiss, parmesan) have a lower lactose content.
- Avoidance of dairy foods is not recommended for anyone that is lactose intolerant. Dairy is nutrient dense and, thus, important for bone growth and development.
- Minimize lactose intolerance symptoms by eating lactose-free or low-lactose dairy products, taking enzyme replacement capsules whenever you do consume dairy, and eating aged cheeses and yogurt.
- You can train your gut to adapt to lactose by consuming small amounts of milk daily to build a tolerance.

References

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