

## Lactose Intolerance: Separating Myth from Reality

Do you think you might have lactose intolerance, or do you know someone who does? If so, you are likely getting advice from a wide range of people on what you should and shouldn't be eating. Unfortunately, there is a large amount of misinformation on lactose intolerance. This misinformation may result in serious nutritional deficiencies and place people at risk for a number of chronic diseases. It is important to be well informed about this condition so that you can make educated decisions regarding your own health and help your friends and loved ones do the same. Following are some common questions and answers about lactose intolerance to help you separate the myth from reality:

**Q:** What is lactose?

Lactose is the sugar found naturally in milk and milk products.

**Q:** What is lactose intolerance?

Lactose intolerance refers to digestive disturbances caused by not having enough intestinal lactase, the enzyme needed to break down lactose.

**Q:** Drinking milk gives me gas and makes me feel bloated. Does that mean I am allergic to milk?

True milk allergies are very uncommon. Only about 1 to 3% of children experience cow's milk allergy and they usually outgrow this by age three. In adults the incidence is even lower. Chances are you are not allergic to milk but have a mild degree of lactose intolerance. Try consuming smaller amounts to see what your "threshold" is for digesting lactose. Using the tips below will also ensure that you are getting enough of the important nutrients in dairy foods without experiencing symptoms.

**Q:** Does lactose intolerance mean I should avoid all milk and dairy products?

No. In most cases it is neither necessary nor nutritionally wise to consume a lactose-free diet. A recent study showed that most people with lactose intolerance can consume up to 2 cups of milk per day, one in the morning and one at night, without experiencing symptoms. Dairy products are an excellent source of calcium, which is needed to develop and maintain strong bones, as well as a host of other nutrients. People who give up dairy products consume far less calcium than they need, putting themselves at risk for chronic diseases such as osteoporosis, hypertension and certain types of cancer. If you have an extreme case of lactose intolerance, talk to a registered dietitian about how to get enough of these nutrients from other sources.

**Q:** If I can get my calcium through supplements and fortified foods like orange juice, why should I even bother with milk products?

Not only does cow's milk contain a variety of important nutrients including calcium, protein, magnesium, phosphorus, zinc and vitamins A and D, but the nutrients are available in a highly absorbable form. In addition, new research is showing there may be a number of other components in milk and milk products that are beneficial to health. Fortified foods and supplements don't come close to providing this unique "package of nutrients" available only through dairy products.

**Q:** Everyone is talking about calcium these days. Why do I need it and how much is enough?

Calcium is necessary for the growth and maintenance of your bones and teeth. Kids and adults who do not consume enough of this important nutrient are putting themselves at risk for osteoporosis and other chronic diseases. For adults aged 20 through 50 the calcium requirement is 1000 milligrams per day. For adults over 51 years of age, the requirement is 1200 milligrams per day. This translates into about three to four servings of high calcium foods every day. The following chart shows some good food sources of calcium.

	Serving size	Milligrams calcium
Yogurt	1 cup	355
Milk (non-fat, 1%, 2% or whole)	1 cup	300
Cheese	1- ½ oz.	280
Tofu processed with calcium	½ cup	250
Cream soup, made with milk	1 cup	213
Frozen yogurt	½ cup	152
Ice cream	½ cup	85
Almonds	¼ cup	80
Dried beans or peas	1 cup	70
Sardines	1 3-inch	46
Kale	½ cup	45
Broccoli	½ cup	40

**Q:** Aren't there some ethnic groups who are not meant to consume dairy products after infancy?

Although some ethnic groups such as African Americans and Asian Americans have a higher chance of developing lactose intolerance, this does not mean they have to avoid all dairy foods. Throughout our lifecycle we are fortunate enough to be able to take advantage of the nutritional qualities of a wide variety of dairy products (milk, cheese, yogurt and ice cream).

Following are some tips to help you include dairy products in your diet if you are diagnosed with lactose intolerance:

- ✓ Drink milk with meals or snacks. Symptoms are generally milder if milk is consumed with other foods.
- ✓ Consume dairy products in smaller amounts – if one cup of milk makes you uncomfortable, try one-half cup!
- ✓ Try chocolate milk – it may be better tolerated and is nutritionally comparable to regular milk.
- ✓ Buy lactose-reduced or lactose-free milk.
- ✓ Eat yogurt and hard cheeses (Cheddar, Monterey Jack and Mozzarella) – these have as much calcium but less lactose than softer cheeses and milk.
- ✓ Increase your consumption of milk products gradually. Your body will slowly build up the enzyme it needs to digest the lactose.
- ✓ If you've been avoiding dairy products due to a recent bout of stomach flu or other virus, gradually introduce them back into your diet after you've fully recovered.
- ✓ Take a commercial lactase preparation such as Lactaid™ when consuming dairy products.
- ✓ Include other good food sources of calcium in your diet, such as broccoli, kale, almonds and fortified foods.

Take the Calcium Quiz on the Dairy Council of California web site at: [www.dairycouncilofca.org/activ-page.htm](http://www.dairycouncilofca.org/activ-page.htm) to see how your current calcium consumption stacks up against your requirement and for additional suggestions on how to meet your calcium requirement.