



LACTOSE INTOLERANCE

What is it?

Food intolerance is a repeated unpleasant reaction to a specific food. This is not the same as food allergy, where the immune system in the body reacts against a specific substance in an extreme and occasionally life threatening way. The term 'lactose intolerance' refers to the symptoms which people experience when they are unable to fully digest lactose due to lack of a specific enzyme (lactase) in the lining of the intestine.

Which foods contain lactose?

Lactose is a form of sugar, found in all animal milk products, though to a lesser extent in butter, cheese and yoghurts than in milk itself. Like all sugars, lactose is a good source of energy. The body cannot absorb lactose until it is broken down into two component sugars which can then pass from the gut into the blood stream.

What are the symptoms and why do they occur?

If lactose is not broken down by lactase in the small intestine and absorbed, it passes through the gut and acts as a laxative. When it reaches the large bowel, it is fermented by bacteria with the production of hydrogen gas. Hydrogen causes bloating but is not dangerous. Cramps (or spasms) occur because the gut responds to the bloating by contracting.

How common is lactose intolerance?

A small number of people have congenital alactasia. This means they don't have any lactase at all, even from birth. These babies therefore cannot digest lactose which is present in breast milk and standard infant milks.

Most adults have normal amounts of lactase as a child but lactase production gradually declines as they get older, though hypolactasia can occur at any age. Lactase tends to decline more rapidly and completely in some people originating from Eastern Europe, Africa, Asia or the Mediterranean area, where milk is not a major component of the adult diet. In these populations, lactase deficiency may occur in up to 70% of people, though not always with significant symptoms. In UK, lactase deficiency occurs in ~30% of adults, though again with variable symptoms.





Is lactose intolerance a permanent condition?

Lactose intolerance can occur after a bout of gastro-enteritis (food poisoning). This is because gastro-enteritis damages the lining of the gut where lactase is produced. This is often referred to as secondary lactose intolerance and is usually temporary. It may also be associated with untreated coeliac disease (gluten sensitivity).

How is lactose intolerance diagnosed?

Often it is obvious from the description of the symptoms. The doctor can confirm the diagnosis as follows:

A test dose of milk

If the symptoms occur after drinking a glass of milk, lactose intolerance is likely. However, this 'challenge' should be repeated on at least 2 further occasions to make sure that the symptoms are predictably associated with ingestion of milk.

Lactose hydrogen breath test

After swallowing a test dose of lactose, exhaled breath samples are taken and analysed for the presence of hydrogen over 3-4 hours. If the lactose is not absorbed normally in the small intestine, but is fermented by bacteria when it reaches the colon, the resulting hydrogen gas is absorbed and detected in the breath samples. However, it should be noted that this only diagnoses lactase deficiency, which may exist even in the absence of significant symptoms.

How is lactose intolerance treated?

There is no cure because lactase cannot be replaced, although some cases of lactose intolerance are temporary.

Children with congenital lactase deficiency need a milk free diet and should be advised by a dietician to avoid deficiency of essential nutrients.

Do I need to avoid lactose containing products completely?

For affected adults, taking lactose in milk causes no harm and the worst that can happen is the development of wind or mild diarrhoea. For most adults, it is a matter of finding how much milk can be taken without causing symptoms. Most people will find, for example, that they can take milk in tea or coffee, though a glass of milk or a milk pudding causes them a mild upset.



Yoghurt often causes less trouble because the lactose has already been fermented by the bacteria used to make it and can therefore be digested normally.

Hard cheese is naturally low in lactose and is usually well tolerated.

Reduced lactose milks are available in supermarkets. These can be used with cereals or in puddings.

It is important to try to include cheese, yoghurt and low lactose milk in the diet if normal milk is being avoided, as dairy products are an excellent source of vitamins and calcium.

**For further information or to access other information leaflets go to
www.londongastro.co.uk.**

***If you have any queries or concerns please do not hesitate
to contact us on Tel: 020 8337 9609***

