

CONCERN:

“I’m lactose intolerant and can’t drink milk.”

RESPONSE:

Contrary to what most people think, many of those who are lactose intolerant can have some milk and milk products. Some of the ways to decrease discomfort are to consume small amounts of milk products at meals and to combine milk with other foods.

IDEAS FOR ACTION:

1. Drink milk in small amounts (up to ½ cup at a time) spread throughout the day.^{1, 2}
2. Eat hard aged cheeses such as Swiss, gouda, parmesan and cheddar cheese. They contain very little lactose.²
3. Eat yogurt. The bacteria in yogurt help to digest the lactose.^{1, 3}
4. Drink milk with meals or other solid foods.^{1, 2}
5. Drink sweetened (e.g. chocolate or flavoured) or 2% or whole milk.^{1, 2}
6. Drink pre-treated milk (e.g. Lactaid® milk) or use lactase drops, capsules or tablets.^{1, 2} Several brands are available from most drug stores.

NOTE: Studies show that drinking one cup of milk treated with lactase drops has the same effect as drinking one cup of regular milk when both are consumed with a meal.^{1, 2}

DID YOU KNOW...

People who are lactose intolerant do not produce enough lactase, the enzyme required to digest the milk sugar, lactose. Undigested lactose remaining in the small intestine is acted upon by the natural intestinal bacteria. This may result in bloating, diarrhea, gas and abdominal cramping.

Lactose intolerant people should experiment to determine their level of tolerance to milk and milk products. Most lactose intolerant people can digest small amounts of lactose. Start by consuming small portions of milk and milk products and gradually increase the amounts until you reach your personal tolerance level.

The main idea is to allow only a small amount of lactose to empty from the stomach into the small intestine at a time. This can be done in several ways:

- Eat a small amount of lactose-containing food at a time. (IDEA FOR ACTION #1)
- Eat foods with little lactose. (IDEAS FOR ACTION #2 and #6)
- Try yogurt. (IDEA FOR ACTION #3)

Many lactose intolerant people can eat yogurt without experiencing symptoms. Yogurt is as effective in reducing symptoms as milk pre-treated with lactase. Although yogurt contains as much lactose as milk, the bacteria in yogurt digest the lactose both during fermentation and after eating the yogurt. Fermentation decreases yogurt lactose content by approximately 25-50%³.

- Delay stomach emptying. (IDEAS FOR ACTION #3, #4 and #5)

Sugar and fat delay stomach emptying and intestinal transit time, consequently allowing more contact time between lactase and lactose.³ Delayed stomach emptying also allows absorption of small amounts of lactose at a time.

Sources:

- (1) Dietitians of Canada, Practice-Based Evidence in Nutrition, Lactose Intolerance Knowledge Pathway. <http://www.dieteticsatwork.com/pen>
- (2) Journal of the American Dietetic Association, Vol. 98, No. 6, 671-676 (1998).
- (3) World J Gastroenterol, Vol. 12, No. 2, 187-191 (2006).