

Have you ever had to turn down a creamy Fettuccine Alfredo or a steamy hot chocolate because you're worried that it might upset your stomach? You're not alone. It's estimated that about 75% of people in the world have some form of lactose intolerance, with the prevalence as high as 90% in some Asian populations.

All You Need to Know

About Lactose Intolerance

by VINCCI TSUI, RD

What is lactose and why does it make me feel so crummy?

Lactose is a two-molecule sugar (disaccharide) made from glucose and galactose. It is found in milk and dairy products. Lactose intolerance occurs when our body does not produce enough of the enzyme lactase to digest lactose. As a result, the sugar passes through our small intestine and into our colons intact, where healthy bacteria break it down, producing gas. Aside from gas and bloating, other common symptoms include abdominal pain, diarrhoea and constipation.

Is lactose intolerance a milk allergy?

No. Whereas lactose intolerance is a sensitivity that only involves the gut, a milk allergy is an immune response to the protein components in dairy. In addition to the GI symptoms, people with milk allergies may experience rash, itchiness, swelling, nasal congestion, coughing, wheezing, or in extreme cases, anaphylactic shock, when eating dairy. Also, while people with lactose intolerance may be able to have some dairy without any problems, any amount of

dairy will trigger symptoms in someone with an allergy.

Since most people are lactose intolerant, does that mean milk is bad for me?

There are some people who argue that since most of us lose our ability to digest lactose after infancy, it's a sign that drinking milk is unnatural, let alone milk from other animals. While that's true to a certain extent, there are many food products out there that are arguably even more unnatural than milk. Also, there are no other animals who cook or combine ingredients to make dishes – would that also be considered unnatural?

Milk and dairy products are good sources of protein. They are also rich in calcium and phosphorus, important bone-building minerals. Milk is fortified with vitamin D as well, and is the primary source of the nutrient in our diet.

So... it's OK for people with lactose intolerance to drink milk?

Different people have different tolerances to dairy – some people with lactose intolerance have trouble tolerating even low-lactose



dairy products like cheese, whereas others can drink small amounts of milk with no issue. If you are lactose intolerant, here are some tips to get your daily two to three servings of Milk and Alternatives as recommended by Canada's Food Guide:

Take lactase enzymes and try lactose-free milk. Lactase enzymes are available as pills and as drops. Depending on your tolerance, take one or two with meals that contain dairy. Lactose-free milk is also common, though it is slightly more expensive than regular milk and – oddly – tastes sweeter.

Try dairy products that are naturally low in lactose. Due to the ripening process, most hard cheeses have very little lactose and are well-tolerated by people with lactose intolerance. While yogurt has about the same amount of lactose as milk, the bacteria in yogurt help break it down – another reason to look for brands that have active cultures!

Take small amounts of dairy to build up your tolerance. It has been shown that the gut does adapt to increased dairy intake over time. Start by having ¼ cup of milk with meals (rather than on an empty stomach) a couple times per day for three to four weeks, then gradually increase the amount and frequency. You may soon find that your symptoms aren't as severe.

Focus on the "alternatives" in Milk and Alternatives. Although fortified soy milk is the only non-dairy "alternative" in Canada's Food Guide, there are many non-dairy milks out on the market, from almond and rice to hemp and quinoa! Be sure that they are fortified with calcium and vitamin D so that you are getting the benefits of the milk alternative. Barring any other dietary restrictions, I generally recommend soy milk as its protein content also matches that of cow's milk; most other non-dairy milks are fairly low in protein.

Is it possible to be healthy without consuming dairy?

There are many cultures that traditionally do not consume dairy, as well as people who thrive on vegan or otherwise dairy-free diets. However, most people who avoid dairy tend to not get enough calcium and vitamin D. Thus, it's important to ensure that you are getting adequate amounts of those nutrients. Some examples of non-dairy foods that are high in calcium include tofu, canned fish with bones, tahini (sesame paste), beans and dark leafy greens (particularly collard greens and turnip greens).

There are few dietary sources of vitamin D – mainly eggs and some types of fish – and for most of the year, we don't get enough sun to produce vitamin D with our skin (and when we do, we're usually wearing too much sunscreen). In my experience, most people who are not supplementing with vitamin D are deficient. The Institute of Medicine recommends that most adults get a total of 600 IU of vitamin D from food and supplements, though some doctors may recommend more.

Similarly, if you are not meeting your calcium needs through food, then a supplement may be recommended. Of course, it's not just calcium and vitamin D that are important for bone health! There are many other nutrients, like phosphorus and vitamin K, that contribute to strong bones; the benefits of weight-bearing activity are also often understated.

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