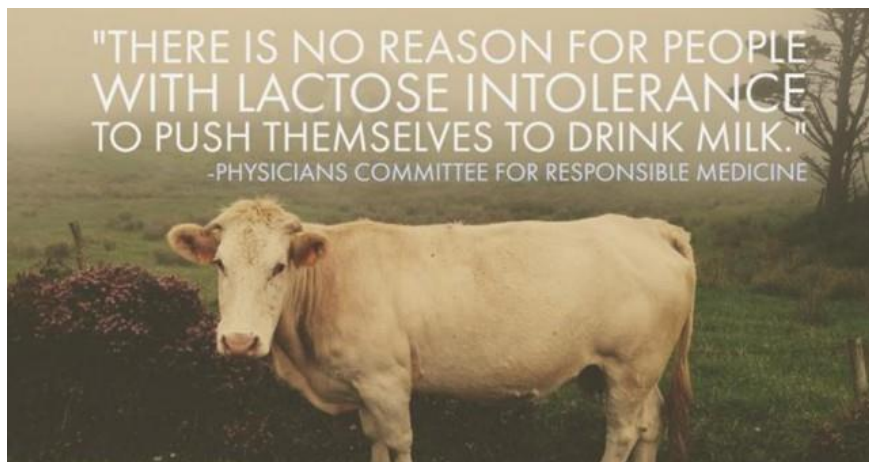


Lactose Intolerance

By David Neville



I've all been there. We've enjoyed our milk and cookies for dinner, then decided ice cream and a movie sounds lovely. And half way through the movie your stomach starts making audible noises, you become excessively gassy, your stomach cramps up, and you walk faster-than-normal to the bathroom to try and relieve the discomfort. It could be indigestion from the overindulgence in food. It could also be lactose intolerance. After all, near 70% of the global population is intolerant to lactose. But how? And why? Especially since breast milk is recommended food of choice for the first year of a baby's life. Is there that much difference between cow's milk and breast milk?

What is Lactose Intolerance?

Especially for infants, milk is seen as a complete food. Something that gives them all the vitamins, minerals, and nutrition necessary for a developing baby. As an adolescent, milk can be useful for meeting nutritional guidelines because milk contains vitamins, minerals, protein, cholesterol, and sugars. But it's the last two ingredients that can give teens and adults problems with digestion. The human body needs to digest foods to extract vitamins and minerals. Milk sugar, aka lactose, needs to be broken down to be digested. Milk proteins, aka casein or whey proteins, need to be broken down to be digested, too. However, not everybody digests milk or protein comfortable or at all.

How many people are lactose intolerant?

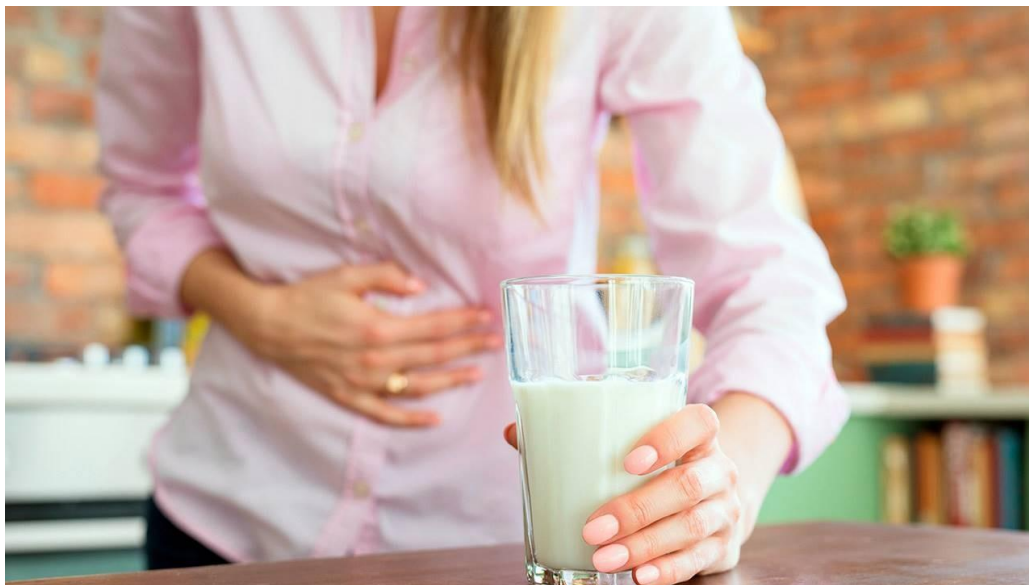
Estimates for lactose intolerance vary by ethnicity. African American and Asian ethnicities see a 75% - 95% lactose intolerance rate, while northern Europeans have a lower rate at 18% - 26% lactose intolerance. For some people, drinking milk with their morning cereal is all the dairy they need for the day. Other people have a bowl of ice cream to end the day. If the combination of those two results in stomach cramps or churning, or a 3 a.m.



emergency run to the bathroom, it's probably safe to conclude that you don't digest cow's milk as well as you could. Rest assured, you're in good company.

Is Lactose Intolerance Genetically Inherited?

Genetically, you likely inherit your lactose intolerance from your parents, and they inherited it from theirs. For most people, lactose intolerance starts developing as a toddler and gets stronger as you grow up because your body reduces or eliminates the production of lactase, the chemical that breaks down the milk sugar lactose. It's also important to note, that when people talk about being lactose intolerant, they're often using a collective term used to describe a few distinctly different maladies like the maldigestion, intolerance, or allergic response to cow's milk or dairy products. Cow's milk gets the most attention because it seems to be the major offender, with yogurts and cheeses contributing to a far lesser extent.



How Can I Tell If I'm Lactose Intolerant?

Testing for lactose intolerance can be done a few different ways; most are performed in a physician's office or laboratory. There's a breath test where you drink a solution of water and lactose, then wait to have your breath tested for high levels of hydrogen. It takes a couple of hours. Another option is to have a few different blood draws to see if your blood glucose levels are elevated, but this requires a few needle sticks so most people opt for the breath test. You can have your stool (aka poop) tested for acidity, have an intestinal biopsy, or have a chromatography test done on your poop. If all of these options seem complicated, well, it's because they are. The easiest way to see if you're lactose intolerant is to run your own test.

Consume dairy in different amounts and see how you feel 30-90 minutes after consumption. Even with lactose intolerance, most people can digest small amounts of cow's milk without having severe symptoms. A cup of milk (eight ounces) is a good test threshold for a day's consumption. Then see how you feel. This will give you a level for how much dairy you can tolerate in your diet. As you remain symptom free, add dairy to your diet to find your threshold. This threshold can change over time, so be aware of how your body feels after consuming dairy.



What are the symptoms of lactose intolerance?

Because symptoms of lactose intolerance vary for individuals, you really need to understand what cow's milk does to your body. Some people complain of minor symptoms like excessive amounts of gas or audible stomach churning while others suffer more major symptoms like painful cramps or explosive diarrhea. In either case, it's important to understand the dose response of dairy to your lactose intolerance level. And keep in mind, these things can change as you get older.

Does string cheese make your stomach upset? Probably not. Does eating an entire pizza send your stomach into fits? Maybe. Does drinking an oversized glass of milk to get more protein make your stomach cramp and your diarrhea explosive? Probably. So if you're getting too much dairy and your body is reacting like a civil war in your stomach, you should reduce or eliminate your consumption of dairy to treat your body right. As the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine recommends, there is no reason for people with lactose intolerance to push themselves to drink milk.

How can I increase my tolerance of lactose products?

Some people crave milk and want it at every meal. If you're lactose intolerant, but don't want to give up your dairy products, you have a few options. A small lactose pill taken with a meal containing dairy can help you digest milk. Some people recommend trying to increase your tolerance to dairy products with a few simple tips. Drink milk with other foods instead of on an empty stomach so it digests easier. Consider smaller portions, then gradually increase the level of milk you drink. Try whole milk instead of skim milk because the fat can help the passage of dairy through your digestive system. Remember, too, that cow's milk isn't the only way to get calcium and other nutrients in your body.

Calcium-rich dairy options that aren't cow's milk

Going dairy-free isn't the only option for treating lactose intolerance. Hard cheeses, like cheddar, have low amounts of lactase so they can often be consumed without the side effects associated with milk. Yogurts, too, have probiotics that help with digestion. Consider goat's milk, too, as goat's milk is about as close as you can get to cow's milk and comes with lower amounts of the milk protein responsible for milk allergies so it is generally more tolerated. As with all animal products, cholesterol is a concern, but lots of cow's milk alternatives have been cropping up to help people consume lactose-free milk that doesn't come from a cow.



Vocabulary:

Lactose Intolerance

Dairy: lácteos

Cramps: espasmos

Churn: revolver

Stomach: estómago

Painful: doloroso/a

Churnings: batidos

Stool: heces

Crave: ansiar

Probiotics: probióticos

Consumption: consumo

Increase: aumentar

Threshold: límite