

Midlands Family Medicine



611 West Francis St. Suite 100
North Platte, NE 69101
Phone: (308) 534-2532
Fax: (308) 534-6615

Education

Lactose Intolerance

What is lactose intolerance?

Lactose intolerance means you have trouble digesting milk and milk products. The condition is most common among Asians, American Indians, Mexican Americans, and African Americans. It is also a more common problem as people get older.

Milk and milk products are an important source of calcium. You should be especially concerned about getting enough calcium if you are in one of the following groups:

- children
- teenagers
- women who are pregnant, are breast-feeding, or have gone through menopause.

To help you get enough calcium, you can make changes in your diet that will help you better digest milk and milk products. Or you can make sure that you get enough calcium from other foods. If possible, it is always best to get your nutrients from food. However, if you cannot get enough calcium from the foods you drink or eat, you may want to talk with your health care provider about taking a calcium supplement.

How does it occur?

You have trouble digesting milk because your body does not produce enough lactase. Lactase is the enzyme that breaks down the natural sugar found in milk. This milk sugar is called lactose.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of lactose intolerance in adults include:

- rumbling abdominal sounds
- abdominal cramps
- abdominal bloating and gas
- diarrhea.

The severity of the intolerance varies from one person to another. Many people with this problem are able to drink small amounts of milk, especially if they eat other foods with it. Others cannot drink any milk without having symptoms. The body naturally starts producing less lactase around age 6. However, the symptoms often do not begin until early adulthood or later.

What changes should I make in my diet?

- Drink or eat smaller servings of milk products but more often. The smaller the serving, the less likely it is you will have symptoms.

- Eat other foods when you drink milk. This slows the digestive process and lessens symptoms of lactose intolerance. Most people with lactose intolerance can tolerate 1/2 to 1 cup of milk with meals.
- You may not have any symptoms when you eat yogurt if it includes an active culture. The active culture in yogurt has an enzyme that breaks down lactose. Check yogurt container labels to see if active culture is included.
- Hard cheeses, such as cheddar, can also be well tolerated due to a lower lactose content. Be cautious about how much cheese you eat because cheese is typically high in fat and cholesterol.
- Look for lactose-reduced or lactose-free milk in your grocery store.
- Try adding the lactase enzyme to ordinary milk. Lactase products, such as Lactaid or Dairy Ease, are available in drug and grocery stores. Some people prefer the flavor of milk with added lactase because it tastes a little sweeter.
- Eat other foods that are rich in calcium, such as leafy greens (collard, kale, and mustard), canned salmon and sardines (if the bones are included), broccoli, and Brussels sprouts. Also consider eating food that has been fortified with calcium, such as orange juice, breads, and breakfast cereals.

How do I choose a calcium supplement?

There are many calcium preparations and strengths. Choosing one can be confusing. The most common products are calcium carbonate and calcium citrate. Look for familiar brand-name products that have the USP (United States Pharmacopeia) symbol on the label. These products have been tested for adequate absorption by the body.

Calcium carbonate is best absorbed with a meal. Calcium citrate can be taken on a full or empty stomach. Calcium citrate may be a better choice for older adults or younger people who have low levels of stomach acid.

Look at how much elemental calcium is in the supplement. The less elemental calcium per pill, the more pills you will have to take to meet your needs. If you want to take just 2 calcium pills a day, you need to choose a product that contains 500 to 600 mg of elemental calcium. Calcium, whether in food or supplements, is best absorbed if taken several times a day, in amounts of 500 mg or less.

Calcium phosphate, lactate, and gluconate are also well absorbed. However, the calcium content of these supplements is low per pill, so you need several pills a day to meet your needs.

Adult Health Advisor 2006.4; Copyright © 2006 McKesson Corporation and/or one of its subsidiaries. All Rights Reserved. Written by Joan Fox, RN. This content is reviewed periodically and is subject to change as new health information becomes available. The information is intended to inform and educate and is not a replacement for medical evaluation, advice, diagnosis or treatment by a healthcare professional.