

Low-Lactose and Lactose-Free Diet

What is lactose?

Lactose is a simple sugar found naturally in milk and milk products. It is typically broken down by the enzyme lactase found in the small intestine. It splits lactose into two sugars which can then be absorbed by the body and used as nourishment.

What is lactose intolerance?

Lactose intolerance occurs when the enzyme lactase is low, which can be caused by aging, intestinal conditions (Crohn's disease, celiac disease), genetics, injury to the small intestine, medications, or surgery (removal of part of the stomach or small intestines). The body cannot break down lactose properly, so bacteria in the large intestine break down the lactose, which causes excess gas and fluid.

What are the symptoms of lactose intolerance?

There is a wide range of lactose intolerance levels. Some people are unable to consume any product containing milk, while others can consume small amounts or certain types of food containing smaller amounts of lactose. Most symptoms occur within a few hours of consuming milk products. Symptoms include abdominal cramping, pain, excessive gas and burping, diarrhea, and urgency of bowel movements. While a low-lactose or lactose-free diet is the ideal way to handle lactose intolerance, over-the-counter products can help digest the lactose in milk and milk products.

What is a low-lactose or lactose-free diet?

A low-lactose or lactose-free diet eliminates lactose or reduces it to tolerable levels to relieve symptoms. They can be used during lactose intolerance testing or after a diagnosis of lactose intolerance.

Low-lactose diet: Typically, only eliminates milk and high-lactose products. However, some patients can tolerate milk, cheese, and yogurt in small amounts. These patients can experiment to find a tolerable level of lactose. In some cases, people can build up their tolerance by gradually introducing foods with lactose.

Lactose-free diet: All lactose-containing products must be eliminated from the diet. Read food labels carefully, as even foods like margarine, shortening, non-dairy creamer, and salad dressing can contain lactose.

References: <https://gi.org/topics/lactose-intolerance-in-children/>, <https://www.healthline.com/nutrition/lactose-free-diet#lactose-status>, <https://www.niddk.nih.gov/health-information/digestive-diseases/lactose-intolerance/eating-diet-nutrition>,

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