

Lactose Intolerance

Lactose Intolerance (LI) is a recognised condition affecting a large proportion of the world's population. It is caused by a deficiency of lactase, an enzyme present in the lining of the small intestine which breaks down lactose (milk sugar) into simpler forms of sugar that can be absorbed into the bloodstream. Undigested lactose remains in the large intestine and is fermented by bacteria creating very uncomfortable abdominal symptoms. Although not usually a serious or life threatening condition it has an enormous lifestyle impact and can cause much suffering.

It is estimated that up to 15% of the UK population is lactose intolerant. This increases to as many as 95% of Asian populations.

Signs and symptoms:

The symptoms usually begin 30 minutes to 2 hours after eating a meal containing lactose and are usually described as nausea, flatulence, cramps, bloating and diarrhoea.



The severity of symptoms varies depending on the amount of lactose each individual can tolerate. The symptoms are similar to those of Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) although with IBS there is often alternating diarrhoea and constipation and pain unrelated to mealtimes. A misdiagnosis of LI as IBS can be negative both for nurse and patient. Patients can be 'labelled' because they re-present with the same symptoms and the nurse is unable to treat the patient effectively.

What tests are available?

The most common tests used are:

- The hydrogen breath test. Raised levels of hydrogen in the breath indicate improper digestion of lactose
- A stool acidity test. Undigested lactose fermented by bacteria in the colon creates lactic acid, which can be detected in a stool sample
- The elimination-challenge diet, removing suspect food from the diet for 2 weeks

Ideally, these tests should be done under medical or dietetic supervision, especially with children.

Hidden lactose

Although milk from mammals and foods made from milk are the only natural sources, lactose is often found in prepared foods such as:

- Some bread, cakes, and snacks
- Instant soups, cake mixes
- Some tablet coatings
- Many ready meals

It is essential that people who might be lactose intolerant read food labels carefully. From 25th November 2005 all food products sold in the UK and the rest of the EU are required to show clearly on the label if they contain milk or milk ingredients.

How is lactose intolerance managed? Fortunately, LI is relatively easy to manage and symptoms can be controlled through diet. No treatment can improve the body's ability to produce lactase.

Some people find that they can tolerate cheese, such as cottage cheese or Edam, and yoghurt, probably because the bacteria used in their making partly digests the lactose.

Lactose-reduced and soy milks are available in supermarkets and there will be a lactose-free dairy drink (Lactofree) on the market in the UK in the new year. This is made from semi-skimmed cows' milk, which is treated to remove the lactose, and it contains the same amount of calcium as normal milk, which is a major benefit.

Enzyme lactase can be bought over the counter as drops or tablets, which can be taken before eating.

People need information to be able to cope with their condition themselves. See below for helpful websites.

Conclusion

Lactose intolerance is a legitimate condition affecting a huge proportion of the world's population. It can cause many uncomfortable symptoms which have an adverse effect on people's lifestyle but it is not life threatening and, when diagnosed, can be easily managed. The new Lactofree drink can help in the management of this condition.

Resources

- British Dietetic Association: www.bda.uk.com/latest-food-facts.php
- Food Standards Agency: www.eatwell.gov.uk/healthissues/foodintolerance/
- National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse: www.digestive.niddk.nih.gov
- Electronic Quality Information for Patients: www.equip.nhs.uk
- British Nutrition Foundation: www.nutrition.org.uk

lactofree