

THE LOWDOWN ON LACTOSE INTOLERANCE

Despite an increased awareness about allergies and intolerances in general, there is still much ignorance surrounding lactose intolerance (LI). In fact a recent YouGov survey showed that only 4% of the UK population understood what the condition was. Lactose intolerance is a condition where there is an inability to fully digest lactose, a sugar found in milk and milk products, resulting in a variety of intestinal problems. This is caused by insufficient lactase production in the gut. Lactase is the enzyme that breaks down the disaccharide lactose to its monosaccharide counterparts

INCIDENCE

According to the YouGov report, in the UK the incidence of LI is estimated to be up to 15% of the population, but many may be living with symptoms that are undiagnosed. The incidence of lactose intolerance is thought to be around 95% of Asians, 75% of Afro-Caribbeans and 50% of Mediterranean and Northern Europeans. The genetic make up of many people preserves the inability to fully digest lactose and, with an increasingly multicultural population within the UK, more and more people are presenting with symptoms. Fortunately, LI can be easy to manage and symptoms can be controlled through making changes to diet.

A reliable test for diagnosing LI is to follow the elimination diet developed by Lactofree which has been reviewed by the British Dietetic Association (BDA). It involves eliminating all foods and drinks containing lactose from the diet for two weeks to see if symptoms disappear. If symptoms do not disappear, then they are unlikely to have lactose intolerance. If symptoms do substantially reduce then lactose can be slowly re-introduced into the diet to see how much can be tolerated.

HIDDEN LACTOSE

Most dairy foods contain some lactose, and lactose is often found in foods such as: some bread, cakes and snacks; some instant soups and cake mixes; some tablet coatings; and ready meals. However, even people with severe lactose intolerance can usually eat butter and lactose-reduced milk. It is essential that people that are lactose intolerant read food labels properly.

Sixty-four per cent of individuals reporting symptoms of LI said they would consider trying a lactose-reduced

milk product. Lactofree, a dairy drink made from semi-skimmed cows' milk, allows lactose intolerant individuals to enjoy the full taste and nutritional benefits of cows' milk without the side effects of lactose. Lactofree starts off as regular semi-skimmed cow's milk and is filtered to remove half of the lactose. The addition of the lactase enzyme breaks down the remaining lactose, so it can be digested without any unpleasant side effects.

HOW IS LACTOSE INTOLERANCE MANAGED?

Most adults can successfully manage to follow the elimination diet without the help of a healthcare professional, providing there has not been significant weight loss and the diet remains balanced. The challenge for individuals with lactose intolerance is not to miss out on nutrients such as calcium and vitamins A and B, which are found in milk and milk products. It is also important that they still have a varied, healthy, balanced and enjoyable diet.

The symptoms and severity of LI can vary between individuals; in some rare genetic cases there is a complete absence of lactase from birth (hereditary alactasia), requiring permanent and full lactose avoidance. More commonly individuals have a genetic tendency (called Primary lactase deficiency) which causes a gradual reduction in lactase activity leading to lactose intolerance in older children and adults. Secondary lactase deficiency is a common but usually temporary consequence of damage to the intestinal wall, for example following gastrointestinal illness.

The symptoms tend to start between 30 minutes to two hours after eating lactose and include abdominal distension, stomach cramps, nausea, flatulence and diarrhoea. The severity of symptoms depends on the amount of lactose each individual can tolerate. Symptoms are caused by undigested lactose reaching the large bowel, where it is fermented by colonic bacteria. Because the symptoms can appear similar to Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS), it can be hard to diagnose LI. A misdiagnosis of LI as IBS can have a negative impact for both the healthcare professional and the patient, as the patient will continue to suffer with uncomfortable symptoms and the HCP will spend more time with the patient as they will more than likely return for multiple visits.



For further information visit:

www.lactofree.co.uk

Details on the ECD and a suitable diet for lactose intolerance can be found on the Healthcare Professional area on Arla's lactofree website: