

GI Hub

Lactose Intolerance Handout

Lactose intolerance means your body has trouble digesting lactose, a sugar found in milk and many dairy products. This happens when you don't have enough of an enzyme called lactase, which helps break down lactose in your gut.[\[1\]\[2\]\[3\]\[4\]](#)

How common is it?

Lactose intolerance is very common. About 65-75% of people worldwide have some degree of lactose intolerance, but it's more common in people of Asian, African, Latino, and Native American descent. Some people are born with it, but most develop it as they get older.[\[2\]\[3\]\[5\]\[6\]\[7\]](#)

Why does it happen?

Lactase is made in the small intestine. If you don't make enough, lactose stays in your gut and gets broken down by bacteria, which causes gas and other symptoms. Some people lose lactase as they age (called lactase non-persistence), while others may have it due to gut infections or other illnesses.[\[1\]\[2\]\[3\]\[4\]](#)

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms usually start 30 minutes to 2 hours after eating or drinking dairy and can include:

- Abdominal pain or cramps
- Bloating and gas
- Diarrhea or loose stools
- Nausea

Some people may also feel tired or have headaches.[\[2\]\[3\]\[4\]\[6\]\[8\]](#)

How is it diagnosed?

Doctors often diagnose lactose intolerance by asking about your symptoms and having you avoid lactose for a short time to see if you feel better. If needed, tests like the hydrogen breath test, lactose tolerance test, or genetic tests can help confirm it.[\[2\]\[4\]\[6\]\[8\]\[9\]\[10\]](#)

How is it treated?

The main treatment is to **reduce or avoid foods with lactose** until symptoms go away. Many people can still eat small amounts of dairy, especially cheese and yogurt, which have less lactose.

Other options include:

- **Lactase enzyme supplements:** These help you digest lactose if you want to eat dairy.[\[2\]\[4\]\[6\]\[8\]\[11\]](#)
- **Probiotics and prebiotics:** Some may help your gut handle lactose better.[\[5\]\[8\]\[12\]](#)
- **Lactose-free products:** These are widely available and can help you get enough calcium and vitamins.[\[7\]\[11\]](#)
- **Colonic adaptation:** Gradually eating small amounts of lactose may help your gut bacteria adapt and reduce symptoms over time.[\[1\]\[12\]](#)

Important tips:

- Dairy is a major source of calcium and other nutrients. If you avoid dairy, choose lactose-free products or talk to your doctor about supplements.[\[7\]\[11\]](#)
- Lactose can be “hidden” in foods like bread, cereal, and processed meats, so check food labels carefully.[\[7\]](#)
- If you have other gut problems like irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), you may need a special diet, such as a low FODMAP diet.[\[4\]\[9\]](#)

If you have questions or trouble managing your symptoms, talk to your healthcare provider for advice and support.

References

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