



“Cradle to Table Nutrition for Early Years Learning”

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Lactose Intolerance

Adverse reactions to food are common and are often wrongly called ‘allergies’ by the general public. A prime example is – lactose intolerance. 2% of the UK population suffers from lactose intolerance.

Lactose is the milk sugar (the main carbohydrate) that is produced by humans and animals (cow’s milk, goat’s milk etc). The digestive enzyme – lactase is required for the digestion of lactose. Individuals who suffer from lactose intolerance have a digestive system that does not produce enough of the lactase enzyme to break down the complex lactose sugar into simpler sugars ready for absorption.

People born with what is called ‘primary lactose intolerance’ lack the enzyme lactase. In such cases lactose in milk cannot be digested at all. The undigested lactose sugar ferments in the intestine and produces gas, bloating, cramps and diarrhoea. Unless severely affected, most adults with primary lactose intolerance can still drink some milk; experts reckon perhaps a cup of milk per day without developing symptoms. This proves that lactose intolerance symptoms are dose related and sufferers can usually consume moderate amounts of yoghurt without any negative effects.

Secondary lactose intolerance occurs when the body loses its ability to produce sufficient quantities of the enzyme, lactase, as they get older. This condition is very common in many African, Indian and Asian populations. Statistics show that lactase deficiency could occur in about 75% of adults in all ethnic groups except for those of northwest European origin for whom the incidence is less than 20%. It is interesting to note that in many of these countries fermented milk products such as yoghurt, kumis, maas or kefir is frequently used.

Yoghurts containing live cultures are partially digested by the bacteria and the lactose is turned into galactose and glucose before the yoghurt is even consumed. Most hard cheeses, e.g. Cheddar Cheese and butter also have very low lactose content.

As dairy products remain a principle source of protein and many other nutrients, it is essential that lactose intolerant sufferers do not exclude this food group without substituting with appropriate products. Many products are available, including soya dairy products (with calcium), pretreated lactose free milk, nut milks, oat milk and rice milk and their products. Note that many organic products are not fortified with calcium and therefore contain low levels of calcium.

Lactose intolerant sufferers are advised to try small amounts of cow’s milk as long as it is spaced throughout the day. It is also thought that lactose-containing foods are better tolerated when eaten with other food.

Keep an eye on food labels; these are the ingredients to avoid:

Milk, skimmed milk, powdered milk, lactic acid.