

Script – Print – Listen to your gut about lactose intolerance

Do you ever get an upset stomach after eating a bowl of ice cream? Or feel nauseous after drinking a glass of milk? You could be suffering from lactose intolerance.

"Lactose intolerance is when your intestines are not absorbing and digesting lactose containing milk, cheese, dairy products properly," says Shitaldas Pamnani, MD, an internal medicine physician with OSF HealthCare. "That leads to stomach cramping, nausea, vomiting and diarrhea, in some cases."

Lactose is a natural sugar found in milk and dairy products like cheese and yogurt. It can also be found in bread and baked goods, breakfast cereals and mixes for pancakes.

For people who are lactose intolerant, lactose isn't properly digested in the small intestine.

"It is very common; about 20 to 30 million Americans are lactose intolerant," says Dr. Pamnani. "It's more common among African Americans. It is speculated about 80% of African Americans and 90% of Asian Americans have some form of lactose intolerance."

Symptoms can start during childhood and can get worse as we age. However, some people might not experience any serious problems until later in life. There are many people, however, with lactose deficiency who can handle some lactose.

"The most common symptom is stomach cramps," says Dr. Pamnani. "Flatulence and diarrhea are other common symptoms."

Dr. Pamnani adds that lactose intolerance can be a debilitating issue for young children because food and milk contain 50% to 80% of the calories young people need to further their development. For adults, receiving a diagnosis of lactose intolerance can be more of an irritant than anything else.

The two biggest factors that cause lactose intolerance are lactose malabsorption and gut sensitivity. Lactose malabsorption is the inability to break down and absorb lactose in your small intestine that leads lactose to enter your large intestine and cause symptoms. "Lactose malabsorption is a deficiency of the enzyme that digests the lactose, and symptoms can sometimes overlap between the two," says Dr. Pamnani.

If you are lactose intolerant, all is not lost. There are ways you can help yourself.

If you are experiencing symptoms, Dr. Pamnani recommends changing your eating habits for starters. For example, eliminate foods high in lactose such as dairy products and prepared foods. You can also try different dairy brands, dairy foods and the amount of dairy you consume. There's also lactose-free milk and dairy products that you can try. You can buy enzyme supplements that help digest lactose. Remember, however, you need some dairy products in your diet, or you may become vitamin D deficient.

Dr. Pamnani says the takeaway message is simple.

"Don't ignore those symptoms," he says. "Proper diagnosis and treatment can really make a big difference."

Consult with your doctor if you continue to experience problems. Your doctor will likely order either a hydrogen breath test for adults or a stool acidity test for children to determine if you are lactose intolerant.