

Lactose Intolerance or Milk Allergy?

(ARA) - Thirty to fifty million Americans suffer from lactose intolerance or a milk allergy, but how do you tell the difference?

Lactose intolerance is the body's inability to digest significant amounts of lactose, the major sugar found in milk. Many people confuse lactose intolerance with a milk allergy, which is not an "intolerance," but a true allergy.

"It is important to understand the difference between the two," says Steven Yannicelli, Ph.D., R.D., director of science and education for Nutricia North America. "People with lactose intolerance can't digest the sugar, but it is the protein in milk and milk products that make those with a milk allergy sick."

SYMPTOMS

People who are lactose intolerant usually experience bloating, gassiness, abdominal pain and diarrhea. But not everyone suffers the same degree of symptoms or shares the same tolerance level. Some people with lactose intolerance cannot drink milk, but can tolerate yogurt and other foods while someone else might not be able to tolerate any dairy products.

People with a milk allergy may suffer from some of the same symptoms as lactose intolerance (like diarrhea). However, infants and children with milk allergy usually experience some combination of a larger variety of symptoms, including persistent diarrhea, vomiting, skin rashes, extreme fussiness, low or no weight gain, gassiness, wheezing and an overall failure to thrive.

AGE OF ONSET

Children - and adults - can develop lactose intolerance at any age (although babies are rarely lactose intolerant before age two) and it usually does not go away. Lactose intolerance tends to be more common among some racial and ethnic groups, specifically American Indians, African Americans and Asians.

Children with a true milk allergy usually start to show symptoms in the first few weeks of life, although it often takes several months to be properly diagnosed. It is unlikely that a child will develop a milk allergy after age two and, for many children, the symptoms resolve around age three or four. Unlike lactose intolerance, milk allergies do not seem to be more common among any specific racial or ethnic group.

TREATMENT

The easiest way to treat lactose intolerance is to avoid lactose. The many low-lactose or lactose-free products available in the grocery store make this very manageable for most people. Lactase enzyme tablets and drops, which can be purchased over-the-counter at many drug stores and supermarkets, may be used in milk products to break down the milk sugar so someone with lactose intolerance can digest it.

Courtesy of ARAcontent

