



**Royal Surrey  
County Hospital**  
NHS Foundation Trust

# **Lactose-free diet for adults**

**Nutrition & Dietetics Department**

**Patient information leaflet**

## What does this information leaflet tell me?

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The information in this leaflet tells you how to avoid lactose in your diet if you are an adult and have been diagnosed with lactose intolerance.

## Why do I need a lactose-free diet?

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Lactose intolerance is a common digestive problem where the body is unable to digest lactose. In the UK, lactose intolerance is more common in people of Asian or African-Caribbean descent. It can develop at any age.

Symptoms of lactose intolerance usually develop within a few hours of consuming food or drink that contains lactose. The symptoms you experience may include one or more of the following:

- flatulence (wind)
- diarrhoea
- bloated stomach
- stomach cramps and pains
- stomach rumbling
- feeling sick

The severity of your symptoms and when they appear depends on the amount of lactose you've consumed.

Some people may still be able to drink a small glass of milk without triggering any symptoms, while others may not even be able to have milk in their tea or coffee.

## What is lactose?

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Lactose is a type of sugar mainly found in milk and dairy products. Generally most adults who cannot digest milk properly (intolerant to), are affected by the lactose in milk, not the cow's milk protein. In babies and children, it is usually the other way round.

When you are lactose intolerant, you should be able to tolerate products that are lactose free, they do not necessarily need to be milk free. For example you can buy lactose free milk which is normal cow's milk with just the lactose removed.

All mammal milks (sheep, goat, buffalo) contain lactose so should not be used.

## What causes lactose intolerance?

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The body digests lactose using a substance (enzyme) called lactase. This breaks down lactose into two sugars called glucose and galactose, which can be easily absorbed into the bloodstream.

People with lactose intolerance don't produce enough lactase, so lactose stays in the digestive system where it is fermented by bacteria. This leads to the production of various gases, which cause the symptoms associated with lactose intolerance described above.

Depending on the underlying reason why the body isn't producing enough lactase, lactose intolerance may be temporary or permanent.

The main types of lactase deficiency are;

### 1. Primary lactase deficiency

Primary lactase deficiency is the most common cause of lactose intolerance worldwide. This type of lactase deficiency is caused by an inherited genetic fault that runs in families.

### 2. Secondary lactase deficiency

Secondary lactase deficiency is a shortage of lactase caused by a problem in your small intestine. It can occur at any age, and may be the result of another condition, surgery to your small intestine, or taking certain medication.

Secondary lactase deficiency is the most common cause of lactose intolerance in the UK. Possible causes of secondary lactase deficiency include:

- gastroenteritis – an infection of the stomach and intestines
- coeliac disease – a long-term gut condition caused by an adverse reaction to a protein called gluten

- Crohn's disease – a long-term condition that causes inflammation of the lining of the digestive system
- ulcerative colitis – a long-term condition that affects the large intestine
- chemotherapy – a cancer treatment
- long courses of antibiotics

The decrease in the production of lactase in secondary lactase deficiency is sometimes only temporary (lasting a few months), but it may be permanent if it's caused by a long-term condition.

It's also possible to develop secondary lactase deficiency later in life, even without another condition to trigger it. This is because your body's production of lactase naturally reduces as you get older.

## Is it an allergy?

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Lactose intolerance isn't the same as a milk or dairy allergy. Food allergies are caused by your immune system reacting to a certain type of food. This causes symptoms such as a rash, wheezing and itching.

If you're allergic to something, even a tiny particle can be enough to trigger a reaction. Most people with lactose intolerance can still consume small amounts of lactose without experiencing any problems (although this varies from person to person).

## Treating lactose intolerance

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There is no cure for lactose intolerance, but limiting your intake of food and drink containing lactose usually helps to control the symptoms. Over time, some people with secondary lactose intolerance will be able to tolerate lactose again.

In addition to dietary changes, lactase enzyme substitutes may also be helpful. These are drops or tablets you can take with your meals or drinks to improve your digestion of lactose. You can buy these from some health food shops or online.

## How do I follow a lactose free diet?

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- Most people with lactose intolerance can tolerate a very small amount of lactose. Speak to your dietitian about this.
- Avoid foods which contain large amounts of lactose listed below.
- It is not necessary to avoid all dairy. Butter and hard cheese are naturally very low in lactose so most people can tolerate these in sensible quantities.
- Replace any foods high in lactose that you normally eat, with suitable alternatives.

## Why is milk important in my diet?

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Milk and milk products are a valuable source of important nutrients in our diets. They provide a lot of calcium and protein. If you are unable to eat them, they need to be replaced with suitable alternatives. You will find suggestions for alternatives in this leaflet.

## What about calcium?

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Calcium is an essential mineral needed to form and maintain our skeleton and teeth. Although our bones are formed when we are young, it is important to maintain an adequate intake of calcium in order to minimise bone loss (osteopaenia or osteoporosis) in later life. Milk and milk products are an excellent source of calcium. If you are unable to have these it is important you achieve your daily intake from other sources. Choose lactose-free milk if possible or calcium enriched milk alternatives. Tinned fish (with bones), green leafy vegetables, nuts and pulses also provide calcium.

For further information, please ask for a Calcium information sheet from your dietitian.

## Products to avoid (contain large amounts of lactose)

- Cow's milk (Jersey, Full cream, Semi-skimmed, 1%, Skimmed, Long life)\*
- Sheep and goats milks\*
- Milk powder
- Condensed milk and evaporated milk
- Yoghurt (all types)\*
- Yoghurt or milkshake drinks
- Malted milk drinks (Ovaltine®, Horlicks®), instant hot chocolate powder, milk shake powder
- Low fat cheese e.g. reduced fat cheddar, cottage cheese, ricotta, quark\*
- Processed cheese e.g.cheese slices, Philadelphia®, Laughing Cow®, Dairylea®\*
- Fromage Frais\*
- Crème Fraiche\*
- Cream (double, single, soured)
- Cream alternatives e.g. Elmlea®
- Ice cream\*
- Milk puddings e.g. rice pudding, custard, semolina\*
- Instant whips and mousses
- Milk chocolate and white chocolate
- Baked goods and cereals containing milk chocolate
- Fudge, toffee and butterscotch
- Ready meals containing milk or cream based sauce e.g. lasagne, macaroni cheese, moussaka
- Packets of mixes to make pancakes and biscuits
- Products containing cream, buttermilk, milk solids, lactose, whey, yoghurt e.g. crisps, some breakfast cereals, some breads

\*Although these foods are very high in lactose, your dietitian may allow you to have them in very small amounts occasionally e.g. 50mls milk in a cup of tea once a day.

## **Foods which may contain lactose (check ingredients on the label)**

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- Salad cream, salad dressing and mayonnaise
- Biscuits
- Boiled sweets
- Dry roasted or flavoured nuts
- Cakes
- Some types of bread and other baked goods
- Some fresh pasta, tinned pasta in sauces, pot noodles
- Some types of savoury rice
- Some breakfast cereals
- Packets of instant potatoes and instant soup
- Some processed meats, such as sliced ham
- Quorn® based products
- Vegetables in sauces
- Savoury dips
- Some tablets or medications

## **Suitable foods (low in lactose)**

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- Lactose free milk
- Soya milk
- Rice milk
- Oat drink
- Coconut milk drink
- Other dairy free and soya free milk alternatives e.g. almond milk, hazelnut milk, sesame drink, quinoa drink, pea milk, hemp milk
- Lactose free yoghurt
- Soya yoghurt and desserts
- Lactose free ice cream
- Dairy free ice cream alternatives e.g. soya ice cream, almond ice cream, coconut milk ice cream

- Lactose free cream
- Non-dairy cream e.g. soya cream, oat cream, coconut cream
- Butter, spreads and margarines
- Non- dairy spreads e.g. Pure®, Vitalite®, Tomor®, supermarket own brand of free from spread
- Hard cheese e.g. cheddar, parmesan, edam, Lancashire, Wensleydale
- Natural soft cheese e.g. goats cheese, camembert, brie
- Non-dairy cheese e.g. soya cheese, coconut cheese, rice cheese
- Dark chocolate
- Dairy free chocolate
- Supermarket 'free from' biscuits and cakes
- Ready salted crisps and plain popcorn
- Pastry
- Tea and coffee (made with suitable milk), cocoa powder, fruit juice, squashes, cordials, carbonated soft drinks

## Where can I buy lactose-free or dairy free products?

- Most supermarkets stock a good selection of branded items and their own 'free from' ranges
- Health food shops
- Online;
  - **Goodnessdirect.co.uk** : Gluten free, wheat free, dairy free, soya free and other specialty foods. Also free from recipes. Deliver to your door, orders over £35 delivery is free.  
**Email:** info@goodnessdirect.co.uk  
**Tel:** 0871 871 6611.
  - Amazon.co.uk
  - Ocado.co.uk
  - Direct from the specific manufacturer

## Checking food labels

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European Union (EU) food labelling laws require that labels must clearly state whether milk (as well as other common allergens) are ingredients in a food product.

These laws apply to all **packaged and manufactured foods and drinks sold throughout the EU**. Since December 2014 they also apply to foods sold loose (e.g. from a bakery, delicatessen butcher or café) and **foods packed for direct sale** (e.g. sandwich bars, market stall, some catering products).

Allergens must be emphasised (e.g. in bold or highlighted) and listed in one place; usually the ingredients label. For foods sold without packaging such as in a bakery, café or pub, allergen information has to be provided either in writing or verbally. If provided verbally, the business must be able to provide further information if requested (in the UK only).

If you travel outside the EU, be aware that labelling laws are different and may not always list milk so check ingredients carefully.

More information on the changes can be found at:  
[www.food.gov.uk/science/allergy-intolerance/label/](http://www.food.gov.uk/science/allergy-intolerance/label/)

## Tips to help you follow the diet

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### Useful websites:

- **Allergyuk.org** : A charity organisation providing support for people with allergies. Tel: 01322 619 898.
- **Nhs.uk/conditions/food-allergy** : NHS choices allergy and intolerance advice.
- **Bda.uk.com** : The British Dietetic Association provides fact sheets on food allergy & intolerance and allergy testing. Tel: 0121 200 8080.

### Online product finder service:

**www.foodmaestro.me** and **www.spoon.guru** : these apps allow you to barcode scan products to check if they are suitable. With these apps you can filter products by ingredients you want to avoid and access suitable recipes.



## References

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- British Dietetic Association Food Facts:  
[www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts/Allergy.pdf](http://www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts/Allergy.pdf)
- NHS Choices website:  
[www.nhs.uk/Conditions/lactose-intolerance/Pages/Introduction.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/lactose-intolerance/Pages/Introduction.aspx)

The information in this leaflet was correct at time of writing.

Please note that product changes are not the responsibility of the author.

If you have any questions about the information in this leaflet please contact your GP or Consultant and ask to be referred to a Registered Dietitian.

## Contact details

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### Nutrition & Dietetics Department

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### PALS and Advocacy contact details

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Contact details of independent advocacy services can be provided by our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) who are located on the right hand side as you enter the main reception area. PALS are also your first point of contact for health related issues, questions or concerns surrounding RSCH patient services.

**Telephone:** 01483 402757

**Email:** [rsc-tr.pals@nhs.net](mailto:rsc-tr.pals@nhs.net)

**Opening hours:** 9.00am–3.00pm, Monday to Friday

If you would like information documents in large print, on tape or in another language or form please contact PALS.

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