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What is lactose intolerance?

Lactose intolerance is the inability or limited ability to breakdown the sugar lactose in milk and most dairy products. Patients have a low level of the enzyme lactase which is located in the small intestine which leads to this condition. Contrary to popular belief this is not an allergy to milk, which is caused by intolerance to the milk protein.

Primary or congenital (meaning something present at birth) lactase deficiency is a very rare occurrence diagnosed in 1 in 10,000. The incidence of lactose intolerance tends to rise with age as we naturally lose lactase. This means that people who are lactose intolerant are actually normal! Secondary lactase deficiency can occur after any damage to the lining of the small intestine which house the lactase enzyme. The most common cause is a gastroenteritis illness (for example when you have vomiting and diarrhea).

There are some that are more prone to lactose intolerance such as Asians, African-Americans, Jews and Hispanics. Symptoms of lactose intolerance include abdominal pain or bloating, loose stools and increase flatulence. It occurs after the ingestion of lactose although not always immediately. Most people may note their symptoms towards the end of the day after they have consumed more lactose than they can tolerate. The symptoms are temporary and do not affect growth or nutrition. You should not have symptoms of weight loss, bloody stools, or laboratory abnormalities such as anemia or increased inflammatory markers.

Many times lactose intolerance is diagnosed and treated by patients themselves with the avoidance or limitation of dairy products. However for other cases formal testing with a lactose breath test or measuring the lactase enzyme level from small intestinal biopsies can be performed. Treatment then involves implementing a lactose free or limited diet. Patients are instructed to drink LACTAID® or soy milk. They should also take LACTAID® tablets which are an enzyme replacement when ingesting dairy products. These also come in a chewable form for younger kids. Patients tend to very well with these changes.