

The Dairy Dilemma

✖ Don Colbert, MD, gives advice on how to handle lactose intolerance—especially if you love dairy.

Q. I suspect that I have lactose intolerance. How can I know for sure? Are there any nutritional supplements that can prevent this? I love ice cream and milk and don't want to give them up! —P.B., Glendale, California

A. If you love ice cream, you're not alone. The dozens of selections available on supermarket dairy aisles or in ice cream parlors suggest that you have plenty of company.

And if your stomach isn't happy about your love of ice cream, you aren't alone, either. "Lactose intolerance"—a source of physical discomfort for many a dairy-food lover—affects a noteworthy segment of the U.S. population. It occurs in approximately 80 percent of Asian and Native Americans, 75 percent of African Americans, 50 percent of Hispanic Americans and 20 percent of Caucasian Americans.

People who are lactose intolerant lack the enzyme "lactase," which breaks down milk sugar into glucose and galactose—which are simple sugars called monosaccharides. The absence of lactase in the body allows lactose to remain in

the small intestine, causing abdominal bloating or swelling, cramps or diarrhea, and general abdominal discomfort. Usually these symptoms occur 30 minutes to two hours after dairy products have been ingested. Foods especially high in lactose are cow's milk—which includes skim milk—ice cream, soft cheeses such as cottage cheese and cream cheese and frozen yogurt.

If you want to continue drinking milk, then I suggest you use Lactaid drops, which contain the lactase enzyme, and can simply be added to a glass of milk. These drops will eliminate most of the lactose.

Lactaid caplets, taken orally, also will help, or you may want to switch to the Lactaid brand of milk.

If you are not sure whether or not you truly are lactose intolerant, then I suggest that you stop eating or drinking all dairy products for a week—and then drink a glass of milk. If the common symptoms of bloating and abdominal pains occur, then it is very likely you have lactose intolerance.

If so, then the next time you drop by your favorite ice cream shop, you'll have a better idea of whether to order one scoop ... or two.