

Lactose Intolerance – Information for Parents

What is Lactose intolerance?

Lactose is a naturally occurring sugar which is found in milk and milk products. It is normally broken down in the gut by an enzyme called lactase. Lactose intolerance occurs when the body does not produce enough lactase to break down lactose in the diet. This can cause symptoms such as diarrhoea, bloating and abdominal pain.

Why does Lactose intolerance occur?

Primary intolerance occurs when the body gradually loses the ability to produce lactase with time. This is common in some ethnic groups especially where milk and milk products are not usually included in the adult diet e.g. Asian, African or Hispanic people. Babies are not usually affected but older children and adults may be.

Secondary intolerance is much more common and occurs when the body temporarily loses the ability to produce enough lactase. This often occurs following gastroenteritis e.g. a bout of diarrhoea. This is the most common type of lactose intolerance in the UK. Some other serious conditions may also cause secondary lactose intolerance.

What are the symptoms of lactose intolerance?

Lactose intolerance should be suspected in a baby or child who has had symptoms such as diarrhoea (especially explosive, loose, frothy stools), abdominal bloating and wind for more than 2 weeks.

What should I do if my baby or child has secondary lactose intolerance?

Bottle fed babies who are suspected of having secondary lactose intolerance should have lactose free formula for 6 to 8 weeks. This allows the gut time to build up lactase again.

Lactose free formulas can be bought at a similar cost to standard infant formula from your local pharmacist or supermarket and will not be prescribed on the NHS. However as they are less commonly used they may have to be ordered in. Most pharmacies and many supermarkets can obtain stock in a few days.

Examples of lactose free baby milks include SMA LF, Aptamil Lactose Free and Enfamil O-Lac. Soya based formulas should only be used on the advice of a dietitian. Children who have been weaned should avoid milk and milk products for 6 to 8 weeks e.g. milk, cheese, yogurt, fromage frais, ice cream. Many cakes, biscuits, croissants, chocolates, processed foods and ready meals also contain dairy products so it's best to read the labels carefully. For children over 1 year, suitable milks are available in supermarkets as part of a lactose free diet. These include cow's milk with added lactase which breaks down the lactose (e.g. Lactofree) and oat or soya based milk alternatives. If you use plant based milk substitutes make sure they have added calcium. Note that goat and sheep milks also contain lactose.

If symptoms do not resolve you should consult your doctor who may refer your baby or child to a dietitian.