

Lactose Intolerance Management

Background

Lactose intolerance is the inability to digest the disaccharide lactose found in milk. Symptoms include diarrhoea, bloating and wind associated with consumption of dairy products. Symptoms occur between 30 minutes to 2 hours after eating.

Lactose intolerance in most cases can be classified into primary or secondary intolerance. In most cases lactose intolerance can be managed by limiting but not eliminating lactose from the diet.

The incidence of primary lactose intolerance increases with age and varies between ethnic groups.

- Asian populations: as high as 80-100%
- Maori and Pacific populations: limited research suggests a rate between 20-60%
- People with UK ancestry: 5-15%

Secondary lactose intolerance is generally short term and occurs after a gastrointestinal infection. It is more common in children than in adults.

Diagnosis

Hydrogen breath testing (HBT) can be used to diagnose lactose intolerance. HBT is only available via private providers in the Southern region. A diagnosis of lactose intolerance can be made by excluding lactose containing foods then introducing them to see if symptoms return.

Dietary intervention to diagnose lactose intolerance

Eliminate dairy products for 2-4 weeks. Substitute non-dairy or lactose free alternatives.

- Hard cheeses do not contain significant amounts of lactose.
- Some medications have lactose based tableting agents.

Note: Symptoms should resolve completely

Challenge by introducing limited amounts of lactose containing dairy increasing the amount from 1/2 serving per day to 2-3 servings per day as tolerated. A serving of dairy is:

- 250ml milk
- 125g yogurt
- 100g ice-cream

If you have primary lactose intolerance: symptoms will return but there will be a threshold level that permits the consumption of some dairy products in most people. Threshold levels vary but most people can tolerate 1-2 servings per day.

If you had secondary lactose intolerance: symptoms are unlikely to return on reintroduction. You can continue to consume the recommended intake of dairy daily.

Management

If tolerance is less than 2-3 servings of dairy daily then encourage the use of non-dairy calcium fortified milk or lactose free dairy products to ensure adequate calcium intake.

- Lactase drops are available from health food shops or pharmacies to break down lactose in milk and yogurt, but take 12-24 hours to work. This is cheaper than ready-made options.
- If the consumption of milk is unavoidable (e.g. social eating) then it is possible to use lactase tablets that can be purchased at pharmacies or health food shops.

This sheet is endorsed as good practice by SDHB gastroenterology, the SDHB Dietitians and WellSouth Dietitians in October 2017