

Ask a Doctor

Q: "Frequently after I eat dairy products I experience bloating and pain in my abdomen. Am I lactose intolerant?"

A: "If you experience pain and bloating after eating dairy products you could be experiencing symptoms of lactose intolerance. Lactose intolerance means the body cannot easily digest lactose, a natural sugar found in milk and dairy products. When lactose moves through the large intestine without being properly digested it can cause uncomfortable symptoms that can be anywhere from mild to severe. Symptoms usually begin 30 minutes to 2 hours after you eat or drink milk products. If you are lactose intolerant your symptoms can include:

- * Bloating
- * Pain or cramps
- * Gurgling or rumbling sounds in your belly
- * Gas
- Loose stools or diarrhea
- Vomiting (typically seen in children more than in adults)

Weight loss, bleeding, trouble swallowing and anemia should NOT be attributed to lactose intolerance and need to be brought to the attention of a physician.

Lactose intolerance is fairly common in adults and teens and tends to run in families. Most people with a family history of lactose intolerance can eat some milk or dairy products without serious problems. Lactose intolerance rates also vary by ethnic background and people of Hispanic, African American, Asian and Native American origin are most susceptible to the disorder.

A big challenge for lactose intolerant people is learning to eat properly while maintaining a good calcium level in their diet. Good alternatives to regular dairy products are milk with reduced lactose, soy milk, soy cheese and yogurt with active cultures. Dietary supplements containing lactase can also aid digestion.

If you suspect that you are lactose intolerant talk to your doctor. He or she may have you avoid dairy products for a short time to see if your symptoms improve. If symptoms don't improve with the absence of dairy in your diet the cause could be of a different origin altogether and may require further exploration by a medical specialist.

Dr. Christopher Sofianos, M.D., is with Westside Gastroenterology Consultants, part of the Hendricks Regional Health Medical Group. His office is located at 100 Hospital Lane, Suite 100, Danville. For appointments call (317) 745-7310.