

For athletes with lactose intolerance: Eliminating dairy is not the right move



Athletes derive many nutritional benefits from milk – carbohydrates for energy, electrolytes for fluid balance, and calcium and vitamin D for strong bones. Scientists have found that low-fat milk is better than sports drinks for replacing fluids lost during exercise. And, dairy milk also contains the two proteins best for rebuilding muscles: casein and whey.

But if you are an athlete with lactose intolerance, you may not be profiting from milk's benefits because your body does not have the ability to digest the sugar (lactose) found in many dairy foods. Having lactose intolerance means you don't have enough lactase, an enzyme which is needed to absorb lactose. Because of that, bacteria in the digestive tract react to the lactose, triggering symptoms like stomach pain and bloating. In spite of lactose intolerance, you can enjoy dairy foods; use these tips below:

Drink lactose free milk products. Reduce your risk of having a reaction by replacing “regular” milk with a lactose-free dairy product. Lactose reduced milk still has all of milk's nutrients including protein, calcium, potassium, and Vitamin D.

Research the lactose content – and the effect of – favorite dairy foods. Reaction to lactose differs from person to person. While one individual may have severe symptoms after drinking a small amount of milk, another person can comfortably drink milk by pairing it with food.

Chocolate milk is better tolerated by people with lactose intolerance than unflavored milk. In an article in *European Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, researchers theorize that cocoa might:

- stimulate lactase activity
- reduce the number of gas-producing bacteria in the digestive tract
- slow gastric emptying

Don't confuse lactose intolerance with a milk allergy. A true milk allergy involves the immune system, while lactose intolerance means you don't have enough of the lactase enzyme to break down the milk. Symptoms of a milk allergy include hives, wheezing, vomiting, runny nose, itchy rash, abdominal cramps, diarrhea, and watery eyes. With lactose intolerance, the inability to break down lactose leads to an upset stomach. These two issues are often confused, and you should consult with your doctor or dietitian if you think you may have a milk allergy or lactose intolerance.