

FOOD ALLERGENS

Milk Allergy

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What is a milk allergy?

Milk allergy is an immune system response to proteins found in milk. Symptoms of a milk allergy can be mild, like hives or digestive problems, or severe, like anaphylaxis, which can be life threatening. Treatment of a milk allergy involves avoiding milk and milk products.

Do not confuse a milk allergy with lactose intolerance. With an allergy, the body's immune system is involved and mistakes proteins in milk

for a threat. Lactose intolerance is the inability to breakdown the sugar in milk, lactose, and does not involve the immune system. Lactose intolerance can cause gastrointestinal upset like bloating, diarrhea, constipation, or nausea. The result is unpleasant, but intolerances are not life-threatening.

Identifying the allergen

Cow's milk is the usual cause of symptoms with this allergy, but milk from sheep, goats, buffalo, and other mammals may cause a reaction in some people. Products made with cow's milk include cheese, butter, ice cream, and yogurt.



Breaking it down further, foods that contain these ingredients can cause reactions and should be avoided:

- Casein
- Milk protein hydrolysate
- Whey
- Lactose and ingredients starting with “lact”

Milk and milk products are often used in the cooking and baking process. Baked goods, snack foods (chips, crackers, pretzels), and pantry staples (pasta, tortillas) may contain milk proteins. Milk and milk proteins are also used in unexpected ways.

Keep an eye out for hidden sources of milk:

- Processed meats like hot dogs, luncheon meats, and sausages may use casein as a binder.
- Shellfish is occasionally dipped in milk to reduce the fishy odor.
- Artificial butter and cheese flavors may contain milk ingredients.
- Some medications may contain milk protein.

**Lists adapted from <https://www.foodallergy.org/living-food-allergies/food-allergy-essentials/common-allergens/milk>*

As one of the nine most common food allergens recognized by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), food manufacturers are required to highlight milk on their food label for easy recognition. This may appear in the ingredients label or in a separate “contains” statement near the ingredients list.

It is important to note that manufacturers voluntarily note whether their product is made in a facility with a potential allergen. For example, a producer may include whether their product is “Made in a facility that produces milk” on the label, but they are not required to. Foods labeled “milk-free” or “nondairy” may contain milk proteins that can cause a reaction. Read the full ingredients label to identify allergens.

Cow’s milk contains many beneficial nutrients like calcium, potassium, and vitamin D. These nutrients

play a large role in the development and strength of bones and teeth. When removing cow’s milk from your diet, consider foods to replace the nutrients you are missing out on. If choosing a plant-based milk alternative, reach for one that is fortified with these nutrients.

Dairy-free sources of calcium include leafy greens, sardines, and salmon canned with bones. You can find vitamin D in many fish species and mushrooms. Standard servings of many fruits and vegetables provide as much and more potassium than what you find in a glass of milk. Baked potatoes (with the skin), spinach, white and pinto beans, grapefruits, bananas, and prunes contain bone-benefitting potassium.

Managing a milk allergy

The best way to manage a milk allergy is to avoid milk and foods that contain milk. Depending on the sensitivity of one’s allergy, some people may be able to tolerate baked milk or some processed foods, like yogurt. Do not try any allergen-containing foods without discussing it with your health-care provider.

Symptoms can differ from person to person. Reactions can occur immediately after eating or drinking an allergen or hours later. A previously mild reaction can be severe the next time.

Symptoms of an allergy can include:

- Skin conditions, like hives,
- Abdominal pain, nausea and vomiting, diarrhea,
- Itching or swelling of the mouth, throat, eyes,
- Shortness of breath, or even
- Anaphylaxis, which happens when your immune system releases a flood of chemicals that cause you to go into shock. Symptoms of anaphylaxis can include the previously mentioned conditions plus tightness in the throat, coughing, choking, or wheezing, or a severe drop in blood pressure. Anaphylaxis is a life-threatening condition and requires immediate treatment.

Minor symptoms may improve with the use of an antihistamine, but this does not make it safe to eat the food. Severe reactions, such as anaphylaxis, require medical treatment. Your health-care provider might prescribe medication for emergency treatment of your allergy. It is important to understand how and when to use the medication. Reach out to your health-care provider with any questions.

Food allergies are different from person to person and symptoms may vary. The severity of a reaction can change over time. The only way to prevent a reaction is to avoid the allergen. Working with a health-care provider, specifically a registered dietitian, can help identify safe foods to maintain a varied and nutritious diet.

References

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