Dairy: Can’t Live With It. Can’t Live Without It

By Alissa White

So it’s girls night and you are hanging out with all of your friends relaxing on the couch with a movie and some popcorn, but nothing goes better with this fun, snack-filled evening then the perfect dessert... ice cream. Everyone is ready to dive in to this delicious, creamy indulgence, except you. You could have that bowl of ice cream, but you will most certainly pay the price later. Lactose intolerance may seem to be holding you back from your favorite foods, but this is not the end of your relationship with dairy. We have the answers for you.

What is lactose intolerance?

For every food we eat, there are enzymes in our bodies that digest and break it down so that we can use the food’s nutrients. This also lets what we don’t use exit the body in a healthy way. Without necessary enzymes to break down foods, the body cannot process them and as a result we get sick and feel extreme discomfort. The enzyme that breaks down sugars (lactose) in dairy products is called lactase. Lactose intolerance occurs when this enzyme is missing or inactive. The absence of working lactase prevents individuals from consuming any dairy product made from milk that still contains lactose.

Is everyone who is lactose intolerant born with the condition? Or can it develop later in life?

Lactose intolerance is a condition that many preterm babies are born with and typically grow out of by developing working lactase enzymes later in life. Unfortunately, while individuals can grow out of the condition, others can develop lactose intolerance in later stages of life. This can occur from a variety of factors including limited consumption of dairy products. By not consuming milk, soft cheeses, and other dairy products, lactase enzyme production is slowed and the body is less able to handle consuming these products.
Are there substitutes for dairy products for lactose intolerant individuals?

Since lactose intolerance is so common in the population today, there are many dairy substitutes sold in regular grocery stores everywhere. The most commonly consumed is lactose-free milk or Lactaid. Lactaid milk is regular milk that has had the lactase enzymes (the enzymes that lactose intolerant individuals are lacking) added to it. By adding the lactase enzymes to the milk, the problematic lactose sugars are already broken down, making it safe for lactose intolerant individuals to consume. (Remember, it is not the milk that is the problem, but the lactose.) An interesting fact about Lactaid is that because the lactose sugar is broken down into simple sugars by the added enzymes, Lactaid tastes sweeter than regular milk. Lactose-free milk is the other milk substitute for regular milk because instead of having added lactase enzymes in milk, the lactose is just removed from it before selling. Either is perfectly acceptable for lactose intolerant individuals.

Other than for milk, there are dairy substitutes for other products as well that those who are lactose intolerant can take advantage of. If Lactaid does not work as a milk substitute, other milk replacement options that do not contain lactose include soymilk, rice milk, and hemp milk. Lactose free ice cream is also a product that is becoming more and more popular. This is an ideal substitute for those feeling left out during that girl’s night ice cream binge. It is a safe way to enjoy the creamy ice cream taste and texture without feeling abdominal pain or discomfort afterward.

Are there any regular dairy products that lactose intolerant individuals can eat?

There are a few regular dairy products that are safe for lactose intolerant individuals. Although some soft cheeses, like mozzarella, may be difficult for lactose intolerant individuals to digest, hard cheeses, like cheddar and Parmesan, tend to be more easily tolerated. The aging process is what causes cheese to harden, and with aging comes the destruction of lactose in the cheese. This is why hard cheeses are safe for lactose intolerant individuals. Also, and newly discovered, yogurt is an obvious lactose-containing dairy product that is good for those with lactose intolerance. Because of the active cultures (healthy bacteria that help with digestion), yogurt is safe and even beneficial for many people who are lactose intolerant. While it does not
help the body to digest normal amounts of other dairy products, the bacteria in yogurt does facilitate the breakdown of the yogurt itself in the body of a lactose intolerant individual, which is what makes yogurt safe to eat. Small amounts of milk may be safe to consume with meals if eating yogurt regularly. These and other products give hope for those who are lactose intolerant that dairy is still accessible to them in some forms.

**Is there a cure for lactose intolerance?**

There is no permanent cure for lactose intolerance that has been developed as of yet, but those with the condition can temporarily prevent the effects of eating lactose-containing products. Taking a lactase pill immediately before eating lactose-containing products is what prevents the negative side effects. This way, the digestive enzymes needed to break down the lactose are already in the system and ready to break down the food consumed after them. So yes…for many lactose intolerant individuals this means they can indulge in real ice cream or nice cheesy pizza every once in a while.

**Are lactose intolerant individuals at risk for any nutrient deficiencies?**

Vitamin D and calcium are the major nutrients from dairy products that people tend to under-consume, but there are plenty of ways to avoid deficiencies in these nutrients. Dairy items like Lactaid, yogurt, and cheese are all acceptable sources of calcium. Taking a daily multivitamin and mineral will also satisfy your needs for both vitamin D and calcium, so there is no need to worry about deficiencies with lactose intolerance.

So next time you think about diving into that bowl of ice cream, stop and think about substitute recommendations made here. Know that you can satisfy your craving for dairy without paying the price afterward.