

Is it cow's milk allergy or lactose intolerance?

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Supporting you to navigate differences between CMA and Lactose intolerance in your baby, and where to go for the right advice.



FACT



Cow's Milk Free Diet means no Dairy.

Milk and ingredients derived from milk can be found in a wide number of food and beverages, it is important to check all labels.¹ In Australia and New Zealand any food containing cow's milk as an ingredient, in any form must, list it in the ingredient list.² Allergy & Anaphylaxis Australia provide support resources to assist you in reading labels for allergens [Reading food labels - Food Allergy Education](#).¹⁸ Cow's milk free is not the same as lactose free. Always discuss a change in diet with your healthcare professional.

FICTION



A breastfeeding mother can eliminate the lactose from her milk via a lactose free elimination diet.

The primary natural sugar in breast milk is lactose.⁸ Whether you keep or remove lactose in your diet the amount of lactose in breastmilk is not related to the amount you consume.⁷ Always discuss a change in diet with your healthcare professional.

FICTION



Low Lactose diet means no dairy.

If your baby has been diagnosed with lactose intolerance it is likely only a temporary condition which will clear up in few weeks as permanent (adult-type) lactose intolerance is very rare in children under the age of 5-6 years. Lactose intolerance does not mean you need to cut out all dairy, some dairy foods contain very little or no lactose at all. Dairy foods also contain significant nutrients and provide a range of health benefits for you and your baby.³ Always discuss a change in diet with your healthcare professional.

FACT



A breastfeeding mother can eliminate the cow's milk protein from her breastmilk via an elimination diet.

To effectively [eliminate cow's milk protein](#) (and sometimes soy) from your diet and introduce suitable replacements to ensure you are meeting your calcium requirements, you should seek the support of an accredited dietitian.⁹ ASCIA and Allergy & Anaphylaxis Australia provide free fact sheets on how to avoid cow's milk in your diet and what may be suitable alternatives for you, until you are able to talk to your dietitian:

FACT



Cow's milk allergy (CMA) involves the immune system; lactose intolerance is due to an enzyme deficiency.

CMA is an immune response to milk proteins, lactose intolerance however is caused by a deficiency of the enzyme lactase.^{4,5}

FICTION



Lactose intolerance is more common than CMA.

Permanent lactose intolerance generally does not manifest clinically before 5 years of age, and is usually referred to as "primary" or "adult" lactose intolerance.⁶ Lactose intolerance in younger children is usually short-term and will resolve in a few days or weeks.¹⁶ CMA on the other hand is one of the most common allergies seen in childhood, with a prevalence of 2-7.5% and usually develops in the first year of life.^{6,11,13} If you suspect your baby has CMA, always discuss this with your healthcare professional.

FICTION



Digestive issues indicate lactose intolerance not CMA.

Lactose intolerance & CMA (non-IgE-mediated allergy, in particular) are often difficult to diagnose as they both present with similar gastrointestinal symptoms (GI), such as nausea, abdominal discomfort, bloating & diarrhoea. In most cases, these GI symptoms are caused by an allergic reaction to cow's milk protein, rather than lactose intolerance.¹⁰ It is also helpful to note if your baby also has skin or respiratory symptoms, Lactose intolerance does not display these types of symptoms, as it does not involve the immune system.¹¹⁻¹³ CMA usually appears during infancy, while lactose intolerance usually starts after 4-5 years of age.⁶ So, although these two conditions may display similar GI symptoms it is important to always consult and be guided by your healthcare professional if your baby is experiencing these symptoms.

FACT



CMI has been renamed CMA, they are the same condition.

If you see CMA described as CMI (Cow's milk "intolerance") this is the same condition, CMI is just an outdated term for CMA.¹⁴ You must still restrict the allergen completely, any amount of cow's milk protein can cause a reaction in a CMA baby. Always consult and be guided by your healthcare professional if you suspect your baby has CMA.

References:

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BREASTMILK IS BEST FOR BABIES: Professional advice should be followed before using an infant formula. Partial bottle feeding could negatively affect breastfeeding. Good maternal nutrition is important for breastfeeding and reversing a decision not to breastfeed may be difficult. Infant formula should be used as directed. Improper use of infant formula may affect the health of the baby. Social and financial implications should be considered.

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