

Dairy-Free Diet

Understanding dairy-free eating, milk allergy, lactose intolerance and nutritional replacements

A dairy-free diet removes foods made from the milk of mammals, most commonly cow's milk. People may avoid dairy because of cow's milk allergy, intolerance, digestive symptoms, veganism, another medical reason or personal preference. The reason matters: a milk allergy is an immune reaction and can be serious, while lactose intolerance involves difficulty digesting lactose and does not always require complete dairy avoidance.

What counts as dairy?

Milk, cream, butter, cheese, yoghurt, ice cream and foods made with milk ingredients are dairy. Goat's and sheep's milk are also dairy and are not suitable substitutes for someone who needs to avoid mammalian milk proteins because of allergy.

Dairy-free replacements

Instead of	Possible alternatives
Milk	Fortified soya, oat, pea or other plant drinks appropriate to the person's age and needs.
Yoghurt	Fortified soya, oat, coconut or other dairy-free yoghurts; nutrition varies widely.
Cheese	Dairy-free cheese, tofu-based alternatives, nutritional yeast in recipes, or other foods depending on the role cheese played.
Cream	Soya, oat or coconut-based cooking creams depending on recipe and tolerance.
Butter	Suitable dairy-free spreads or plant oils.
Milk-based protein	Soya foods, pulses, eggs/meat/fish if eaten, nuts/seeds where safe, and other protein foods.

Dairy-free does not automatically mean lactose-free - and vice versa

Lactose-free cow's milk still contains milk proteins, so it is not suitable for cow's milk protein allergy. Conversely, someone with lactose intolerance may tolerate some lower-lactose dairy foods or lactose-free dairy products. Diagnosis helps avoid unnecessary restriction.

Replacing rather than simply removing

Dairy can contribute protein, calcium, iodine and other nutrients. If it is removed, suitable replacements should be considered rather than assuming a plant drink is nutritionally identical.

Milk Allergy, Lactose Intolerance & Other Reasons

Cow's milk allergy

Cow's milk allergy is an immune response to milk proteins. Reactions may be immediate or delayed and can involve skin, gastrointestinal or respiratory symptoms. Immediate reactions can sometimes be severe. Anyone with a diagnosed allergy should follow their individual allergy plan and emergency-medication advice.

Lactose intolerance

Lactose intolerance occurs when the body has insufficient lactase to digest lactose, the natural sugar in milk. Symptoms can include bloating, abdominal discomfort, wind and diarrhoea after lactose-containing foods. It is not an allergy and does not cause anaphylaxis.

How much restriction is needed?

Tolerance in lactose intolerance varies. Some people manage small amounts of lactose, yoghurt or hard cheese; others use lactose-free dairy. A strict dairy-free diet may therefore be more restrictive than necessary. Milk allergy, by contrast, requires avoidance of the relevant milk proteins as advised medically.

Vegan and personal-choice dairy-free eating

People may exclude dairy for ethical, environmental or personal reasons without having an allergy or intolerance. Nutritional planning is still relevant, particularly when dairy has previously been a major source of calcium, iodine, protein or vitamin B12.

Know the difference

Situation	Key point
Milk allergy	Immune reaction to milk protein; strict avoidance may be required and reactions can be serious.
Lactose intolerance	Difficulty digesting lactose; individual tolerance varies and lactose-free dairy may be suitable.
Vegan diet	Excludes all animal-derived dairy for ethical or other reasons; fortified alternatives are important.
Personal preference	Dairy may be excluded by choice; consider whether nutrient replacements are adequate.

Seek assessment for persistent symptoms

Digestive symptoms have many possible causes. Removing several food groups without assessment can make diagnosis harder and may unnecessarily narrow the diet. A GP or registered dietitian can help determine whether dairy, lactose or something else is responsible.

Calcium, Iodine, Protein, Vitamin D & B12

Calcium

Dairy is a major calcium source for many people in the UK. When dairy is excluded, choose plant drinks and yoghurts fortified with calcium where appropriate. Calcium-set tofu, some green vegetables, tahini and certain fortified foods can contribute, but amounts vary.

Iodine

Cow's milk and dairy products are important iodine sources in many UK diets. Plant drinks are not automatically iodine-fortified, even when they contain calcium. Check the label. Seaweed is not a straightforward replacement because iodine content can be highly variable and excessive amounts can be harmful.

Protein

Soya milk generally contains more protein than many other plant drinks, though formulations vary. Other protein sources include tofu, tempeh, pulses, eggs, meat or fish if eaten, nuts and seeds where safe. Some dairy-free cheeses contain little protein, so they should not automatically be treated as a nutritional equivalent to dairy cheese.

Vitamin D

Some dairy-free products are fortified with vitamin D. UK public-health guidance recommends considering a daily vitamin D supplement during autumn and winter, with year-round supplementation advised for some groups.

Vitamin B12

People who eat meat, fish or eggs may obtain B12 elsewhere. Those following a vegan dairy-free diet need reliable B12 from fortified foods or supplements. Check individual product labels rather than assuming all dairy alternatives are fortified.

What to check on a plant drink

Nutrient/feature	Why it matters
Calcium	Look for fortification if the drink replaces dairy regularly.
Iodine	Not present in many products; check specifically.
Vitamin D	Useful fortification, though UK supplement guidance may still apply.
Vitamin B12	Especially relevant for vegan diets.
Protein	Varies substantially; soya and some pea products may contain more than rice/oat/nut drinks.
Age suitability	Plant drinks are not interchangeable with infant formula and some are unsuitable as main drinks for young children.

Meals, Shopping, Labels & Everyday Life

Example dairy-free day - ideas, not rules

Breakfast: porridge with fortified plant drink; eggs on toast; dairy-free fortified yoghurt with oats; or cereal with a suitable alternative. **Lunch:** lentil soup and bread; hummus wrap; baked potato with beans; tuna sandwich without dairy ingredients. **Dinner:** curry made with a suitable dairy-free base, chilli and rice, tofu stir-fry, pasta with tomato/vegetable sauce, or fish/meat with potatoes and vegetables if eaten.

Reading labels for milk allergy

Milk is one of the UK allergens that must be emphasised in ingredient lists on prepacked foods. Check every product because recipes can change. People with allergy also need to consider precautionary allergen labelling and cross-contact according to their clinical advice.

Ingredients that may indicate milk

Examples include milk powder, whey, casein/caseinate, cream, butter, cheese and yoghurt. The allergen declaration is more reliable than trying to memorise every technical ingredient name.

Shopping framework

Cupboard	Fridge/freezer	Check fortification
Oats, rice, pasta	Plant drinks/yoghurts	Calcium
Beans and lentils	Tofu/tempeh	Iodine
Bread/crackers	Eggs/meat/fish if eaten	Vitamin D
Nuts/seeds if safe	Dairy-free spreads	Vitamin B12
Tinned foods	Frozen vegetables	Protein content

Eating out

For milk allergy, tell staff clearly that dairy avoidance is an allergy requirement. Butter, cream, cheese and milk can appear in sauces, mashed potato, baked goods and dishes that do not look dairy-based. Vegan-labelled dishes can be useful but allergy cross-contact still needs checking.

Budget and convenience

Specialist dairy-free cheeses and desserts can be expensive. Fortified plant drink, ordinary naturally dairy-free meals, pulses, grains, vegetables and other tolerated proteins can keep costs lower. Convenience products can still be valuable when time, fatigue or executive functioning makes preparation difficult.

ARFID, Sensory Needs, Children & Restrictive Eating

ARFID, autism and sensory differences

Milk, yoghurt and cheese are common safe foods because their flavour and texture can be predictable. Removing them can therefore have a disproportionate effect for someone with ARFID or sensory-based eating. Plant alternatives often taste, smell or feel noticeably different even when marketed as substitutes.

Protect nutrition first. Trial one alternative at a time, keep presentation predictable and consider how the original dairy food functioned: was it providing calories, protein, calcium, familiarity, a smooth texture or an easy breakfast? The replacement needs to address those needs, not merely look similar.

Babies and young children

Infants with suspected cow's milk allergy require professional assessment. Ordinary plant drinks are not substitutes for breast milk or appropriate infant formula. Young children have high nutrient needs for their size, so dairy exclusion should be planned carefully with suitable professional advice where needed.

Eating disorders and unnecessary restriction

A medically necessary dairy-free diet can coexist with an eating disorder, but extra rules can accumulate around it. If dairy has been removed without clear need and the diet is becoming progressively smaller, assessment can help distinguish genuine symptoms from restrictive eating patterns.

Multiple allergies and intolerances

Dairy-free plus gluten-free, nut-free, soya-free or other restrictions can make calcium, iodine, protein and energy much harder to obtain. A registered dietitian can help identify safe alternatives without adding unnecessary exclusions.

Bone health

Long-term inadequate calcium, vitamin D, protein and overall energy can affect bone health. This is particularly relevant during childhood and adolescence, pregnancy, later life and in people with prolonged restrictive eating.

When to seek professional support

Seek advice for suspected milk allergy, severe or immediate reactions, persistent gastrointestinal symptoms, unexplained weight loss, concerns about a child's growth, multiple food exclusions, very limited safe foods, or uncertainty about calcium/iodine replacement.

Dairy-free eating should solve a genuine problem or reflect a chosen value - not create a new nutritional problem through inadequate replacement.

Myths, Personal Check-In & Sources

Common myths

“Dairy-free and lactose-free are the same.” They are not. Lactose-free dairy still contains milk protein. **“Goat’s milk is safe for cow’s milk allergy.”** It is generally not an appropriate substitute because proteins are similar. **“All plant milks are nutritionally equal.”** Protein and fortification vary greatly. **“Dairy-free means calcium-free.”** Calcium can come from fortified alternatives and other foods. **“If dairy upsets my stomach, I must be allergic.”** Allergy and intolerance are different and symptoms need appropriate assessment.

Personal check-in

- Why am I dairy-free - allergy, lactose intolerance, veganism, another medical reason or preference?
- If symptoms are unexplained, have I sought assessment rather than removing more foods?
- What has replaced the protein and energy I previously got from dairy?
- Is my regular plant drink/yoghurt fortified with calcium?
- Have I checked whether it contains iodine?
- If I am vegan, where is my reliable vitamin B12 coming from?
- Are my replacements acceptable in taste and texture, especially if I have sensory needs?
- Is dairy-free eating manageable, or is my overall diet becoming increasingly restricted?
- Would a registered dietitian help me make the diet safer and easier?

A message from Space to Breathe Therapy

Dairy-free eating can be medically essential, personally meaningful or simply a choice. Whatever the reason, you deserve alternatives that work in real life. A replacement does not have to be fashionable or perfect; it needs to be safe, tolerable, nourishing and practical for you. If removing dairy has made eating harder or reduced your safe-food range, support can help you rebuild choice without judgement.

Evidence and further reading

NHS - Lactose intolerance: information on symptoms, causes, diagnosis and dietary management.

NHS / Allergy guidance: information distinguishing food allergy from intolerance and recognising serious allergic reactions.

NHS - Dairy and alternatives: guidance on calcium, protein and choosing fortified dairy alternatives.

British Dietetic Association: dietitian-produced food fact sheets covering cow’s milk allergy, lactose intolerance, calcium and plant-based eating.

Educational information only. This guide does not diagnose milk allergy or lactose intolerance and is not a substitute for personalised medical, allergy or dietetic advice.