

Summary of Key Findings & Recommended Strategies

A 2009 report from the National Medical Association (NMA) suggests that African Americans may be at risk for nutrient deficits as a result of under-consumption of dairy products attributed, in part, to the existence of lactose intolerance among this population. The report, *Lactose Intolerance and African Americans: Implications for Consumption of Appropriate Intake Levels of Key Nutrients*¹, recommends dairy foods as the first choice for people with lactose intolerance. The report provides recommendations on how health professionals can best address lactose intolerance with their patients.

Key Findings Cited in NMA's Report

- ▶ While African Americans appear to be disproportionately affected by lactose intolerance, earlier estimated prevalence rates may be inflated because they were based on tests for lactose maldigestion using greater amounts of lactose (50 gm in water) than is typically consumed from a glass of milk (12 gm). However, more recent research estimates that approximately one-third to one-fifth of individuals with limited lactase activity (the enzyme needed to digest lactose) will actually have digestive symptoms after consuming dairy foods.
- ▶ Poor dairy consumption patterns among African Americans may create nutritional deficits that increase their vulnerability to chronic diseases, such as hypertension, obesity, certain cancers, and diabetes/insulin resistance syndrome.
- ▶ In a 2004 study, NMA found that of the 24 percent of African Americans who reported having symptomatic lactose intolerance, 85 percent said they would add more milk and dairy products to their diet if they could avoid the symptoms.

NMA's Recommended Strategies

NMA's report highlights five recommendations, summarized below, that health professionals can use to educate their patients:

- ▶ **Know and Understand the Roles and Sources of Nutrients:** Many African Americans are unaware of the number of servings recommended from the five food groups. "Thus, physicians and other health care providers may wish to disseminate dietary guides to African Americans that educate them regarding the critical role that three daily servings of dairy products – milk, yogurt, or cheese – can play in ensuring a sufficiency of calcium, riboflavin, protein, potassium, and/or other nutrients."



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- ▶ **Encourage Patients to be Formally Tested for Lactose Intolerance:**
“Physicians and providers can do much to reduce dairy nutrient deficiencies by including the question of lactose tolerance as a core question when medical data for African Americans are collected. Persons who check the “yes” box can then be tested for lactose intolerance levels using the standard Lactose Tolerance Test, the Hydrogen Breath Test, the Stool Acidity Test, or one of the emerging methods of testing.”
- ▶ **Gradually Increase Use of Lactose:** There is evidence from milk adaptation studies that gradually increasing regular exposure to lactose-containing foods can increase tolerance. The report encourages practitioners to also recommend other strategies documented to improve tolerance, including drinking milk with food, enjoying lactose-reduced milk and milk products, eating aged cheeses (i.e., Cheddar and Swiss) that are low in lactose, and eating yogurt with live and active cultures that help digest lactose.
- ▶ **Provide Health Education Regarding the Role that Dairy Nutrients Play in Hypertension, Obesity, Diabetes, and Other Chronic Illnesses:** Since African Americans are at disproportionate risk for these chronic diseases, the report suggests that physicians and other providers disseminate information to their patients with chronic illnesses regarding these relationships. Helping clients link dairy consumption with health benefits may beneficially impact the prevalence of these conditions.
- ▶ **Use Milk-Substitute Products:** To reduce the risk of nutritional deficits, providers should recommend the consumption of yogurts, lactose-reduced/free milk and other low lactose products in the milk food group – or encourage clients to use lactase enzyme supplements when consuming milk group foods.

The paper concludes, “Since dairy nutrients address important health concerns, the amelioration of lactose intolerance is an investment in health.”

The authors say, “It is possible to consume dairy even in the face of a history of maldigestion or lactose intolerant issues,” and that “it is essential for physicians to communicate [these] key messages to their patients.”

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Visit www.NationalDairyCouncil.org for more information, patient education materials and strategies – such as opting for lactose-free milk or trying small amounts of milk with meals – that may help people with lactose intolerance enjoy the recommended three servings of low-fat and fat-free dairy foods every day – without discomfort.

1. National Medical Association. Lactose Intolerance and African Americans: Implications for the Consumption of Appropriate Intake Levels of Key Nutrients. JNMA. Supplement to October 2009; Volume 101, No. 10.

