

## LACTOSE INTOLERANCE

Approximately 30 to 50 million Americans suffer from lactose intolerance, the inability to digest significant amounts of lactose, the predominant sugar of milk (National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse). In fact, African Americans, Native Americans, Hispanics, and Asian Americans have higher rates of prevalence than Caucasians (American Academy of Family Physicians).

Lactose is found in a variety of foods, including milk and many processed foods. Some people who suffer from lactose intolerance experience symptoms after one glass of milk. Others react to even smaller amounts of lactose, therefore relying on lactase enzymes to help alleviate symptoms. Lactose intolerance generally causes serious discomfort and is a life long inherited condition. For example, common symptoms among school children include abdominal pain, diarrhea, and gas (American Academy of Family Physicians).

People of color show higher rates of lactose intolerance:

- Lactose intolerance is present in up to 15% of persons of northern European descent, 80% of Blacks and Latinos, and up to 100% of Native Americans and Asians (American Academy of Family Physicians, May 2002).
- The genetically determined reduction in lactase production occurs at about five years of age in many people of African or Asian descent, and is observed in Mexican American children by age three (American Academy of Pediatrics).
- In contrast, most Caucasians (80 %) have a gene that allows for the preservation of the ability to produce lactase into adulthood (National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse).
- As people of color are unable to digest dairy protein, relying on dairy products as a sole source of calcium can hinder calcium absorption and cause long-term digestive problems (Physicians Committee on Responsible Medicine).

Recommendation:

- The National Council of La Raza recommends that reauthorization of child nutrition programs include parental choice on child nutrition decisions, including allowing soy products to be a reimbursable commodity at schools that enroll high numbers of children of color. Moreover, parental choice and not a doctor's note should drive the availability of food alternatives for all students.