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Milk Protein Intolerance

Milk protein intolerance (MPI) means that the body is not tolerating consumption of cow's milk proteins. The reactions are often delayed rather than immediate. This is an intolerance of mainly casein and whey proteins which are present in all products derived from cow's milk. This is not the same as lactose intolerance or milk protein allergy (MPA). In lactose intolerance the body does not properly digest lactose which is a sugar in milk. Milk protein allergy refers to a disorder that leads to immediate allergic symptoms upon contact or consumption of milk including hives, throat swelling, asthma and anaphylaxis.

Symptoms

Milk protein intolerance almost always has its onset in infancy and is most common in young children. Usually there have not been any immediate type reactions upon consumption of milk. The symptoms are often delayed hours to days after intake of milk. Sometimes the disorder goes undiagnosed during infancy but symptoms can often be traced back to the first year of life. Babies can present with rashes including eczema and hives, chronic nasal congestion, recurrent ear infections or sinus infections, colic, stomach upset, diarrhea, constipation, gastroesophageal reflux disease, irritability, poor sleep, chronic cough and sometimes wheezing. Sometimes the rashes are fleeting. The rash of MPI can be as simple as tiny bumps on the cheeks and upper arms with fleeting redness. Some children will have chronic redness of the cheeks or earlobes. Some children will have blood in the stool or anemia (low red blood cell count).

Children greater than a year of age may have recurrent sinus or ear infections and may have been diagnosed with allergies. Other children are picky eaters and complain of a lot of stomach aches. Chronic constipation is common. Many children will actually crave milk products such as cheese. Other children will refuse to drink milk. Some of these children may have been on soy or hypoallergenic formulas and then were switched to cow's milk at age 1 because it was presumed that they had outgrown the problem when they actually have not.

Adults can have MPI, too but it is not as common. It often dates back to childhood and just never went away. Most often the adults have put milk back into the diet and they do not realize that the milk is triggering symptoms.

Diagnosis

Diagnosis is difficult because there is not a specific test for milk protein intolerance. Testing should be performed to rule out milk protein allergy. Children with MPI will have negative allergy tests for milk. Blood work may show a chronic anemia and stool studies may show microscopic blood in the stool (or sometimes visible blood) or eosinophils in the stool. Endoscopy is not commonly performed but shows swelling/inflammation in the intestines.

The diagnosis is confirmed after absolute elimination of cow's milk protein in the diet for 3-4 weeks. Clinical improvement should be noted. A milk challenge can be performed to see if the symptoms return upon reintroduction, but this step is not absolutely necessary for a child with marked improvement. I recommend using a diet journal to catalog symptoms and then monitor progress.

Management

The only form of treatment is avoidance. In the beginning strict avoidance of all cow's milk is recommended. This includes avoiding milk, cheese, ice cream, sour cream, cottage cheese, yogurt, pudding, etc. All labels should be read to see if there is milk present in the food. All foods that contain milk should be eliminated. Fortunately, kids with MPI are not prone to severe allergic reactions. As the child improves the management plan can be adjusted based on each individual response. After a period of time, many children are able to tolerate highly cooked milk products in cookies and breads, etc. Eventually many children outgrow the intolerance. Statistics suggest that 80% of kids outgrow it by age 3. This also means that 20% of kids will need to continue to avoid milk in the diet. The allergy specialist should reevaluate the child periodically to determine when or if the milk intolerance has resolved.