

If your ***child reacts*** to cows' milk, isn't it time ***you reacted too?***



Restless sleep?

Skin rashes?

Diarrhoea?

Vomiting?

Reflux?

Colic?



Parent information leaflet

Cows' **Milk** Allergy

## What is a food allergy?

A food allergy is when the body's immune system reacts to the protein in a particular food. The immune system mistakenly tries to protect the body from the food protein, which then causes an allergic reaction.

## What is the difference between food allergy and food intolerance?

Food intolerance is not the same as a food allergy. **Food intolerance** is when the body doesn't tolerate certain foods very well. Symptoms usually affect the digestive system and can include, for example, a sore tummy, diarrhoea, constipation or wind after eating. This response is not caused by the immune system. A **food allergy** is usually a reaction to protein in food but, food intolerance can be sparked off by any ingredient in food, including additives. True food intolerance in babies and young children is actually very rare.

## What is the most common type of food allergy?

There are eight foods in our diet that are most commonly associated with a food allergy:

- Milk
- Egg
- Fish
- Peanuts
- Tree nuts
- Shellfish
- Soya
- Wheat



Cows' Milk Allergy (CMA) is sometimes also called Cows' Milk Protein Allergy (CMPA) and is the most common allergy diagnosed in young babies. This is because milk provides the main source of nourishment for the first six months, either from breast milk or baby formula. Cows' milk is the main ingredient in most baby formulas and that is why CMA is mostly diagnosed in babies who are formula fed.

## What can cause my child to have a milk allergy?

Although research is ongoing, it is not fully understood what causes any food allergy. However, there are some risk factors for food allergies. These include:

- Family history – babies who have a parent or brother or sister with asthma, eczema or a food allergy may be at increased risk of developing an allergy.
- Babies born with asthma or atopic dermatitis (an allergic skin condition) will be more likely to develop an allergy.

## What are the symptoms of milk allergy?

The symptoms of CMA affect the digestive system, the skin or the lungs. Some babies will have an immediate and severe reaction to cows' milk such as **wheezing, swelling of the lips, itchy and red blotchy skin or vomiting**. In very rare cases, some babies might develop **anaphylaxis** – a life-threatening reaction which requires emergency medical attention.

Other babies will have a more delayed reaction, that appears between several hours and up to three days after drinking their cows' milk formula. These babies might have one or more of the symptoms listed overleaf.



## Symptom checklist

### Digestive System Symptoms

- Vomiting . . . . .
- Reflux . . . . .
- Diarrhoea . . . . .
- Colic . . . . .
- Wind or bloating . . . . .
- Blood or mucus in stools . . . . .
- Constipation . . . . .

### Skin symptoms

- Eczema . . . . .
- Skin rash such as hives . . . . .

### Lungs

- Wheezing . . . . .
- Cough or sneezing . . . . .
- Breathing problems . . . . .

### Other symptoms

- Eye, lip or facial swelling . . . . .
- Low or slow weight gain . . . . .
- Restlessness or poor sleeping . . . . .
- Feed refusal . . . . .
- Extreme crankiness or irritability . . . . .
- Back arching . . . . .

Please Note: A baby with CMA might have one or more of the symptoms listed. This checklist does not confirm a diagnosis of CMA, but is intended to help you when speaking with your family doctor (GP) or paediatrician.

## Could my child have Cows' Milk Allergy?

The more symptoms your baby has, the more it would seem to point to CMA.

You can use the symptom checklist to assess whether your baby may have CMA. But this does **not** confirm a diagnosis – the checklist is designed to be used together with a physical examination by a qualified doctor who will take a detailed history.

## How is Cows' Milk Allergy diagnosed?

CMA will be diagnosed by your GP or paediatrician. Once an allergy to milk is suspected, they will take a detailed clinical history. This involves asking if:

- If there is a family history of allergies;
- If your baby is breast or formula fed;
- How often your baby feeds and how much they take;
- How their weight is doing; and
- What kind of symptoms they are showing.

After this, your doctor or paediatrician may decide to perform a blood or skin test to help with the diagnosis, and then to have a trial period of elimination, whereby cows' milk is removed from your baby's diet. If the symptoms resolve after 2-4 weeks of avoiding cows' milk, this can confirm a diagnosis of CMA.

## What is the treatment for Cows' Milk Allergy?

Once an allergy to milk has been diagnosed, the treatment is to completely remove cows' milk from the diet.



## So, can I still breastfeed if my baby is diagnosed with Cows' Milk Allergy?

Yes. Breastfeeding is always best for your baby. If an allergy to milk is suspected and your baby has only been breastfed since birth, the doctor or dietitian might advise you to remove milk and foods that contain milk (such as dairy foods) from your own diet to see if that will improve the situation.

This is because some of the milk proteins can transfer from a mother's diet into her breast milk. It is important that you get advice about suitable dietary replacements or supplements from your family doctor or other medical professional to make sure you get enough calcium. If your baby still displays allergy symptoms, you might be advised to move on to a specialised baby formula

## What if my baby is bottle fed?

If your baby is fed with milk formula, you will need to switch to a specialised formula. This is also known as a 'hypoallergenic formula' and will be prescribed by your doctor.

## What is hypoallergenic formula?

### There are two types of hypoallergenic formulas:

Extensively Hydrolysed Formula (EHF) and Amino Acid Formula (AAF).

**EHFs** are manufactured from cows' milk but are specially treated so that the proteins are broken down, reducing the chances of an allergic reaction.

**AAFs** do not contain any cows' milk. These are made with amino acids – the building blocks of protein and are non-allergenic.

Your GP, paediatrician or dietitian will recommend the most suitable formula for your baby.

## Why can I not buy specialised hypoallergenic formula from the supermarket?

Unlike standard baby milks, these specialised formulas are classified as medical products. This means that they must be used under the supervision of a healthcare professional such as your doctor or dietitian and are only available from your local pharmacy.

## Can I use soya or any other type of milk formula?

Soya formula is widely available and is made from soya beans. Soya formula is unsuitable if your baby has CMA.

### There are two reasons for this:

- Soya formula is not recommended by healthcare professionals for babies under six months (except in very specific and rare medical conditions which your doctor will advise you on).
- In babies with CMA, there is a high risk that they will also be allergic to soya.

### The following milks are also not suitable for CMA:

- 'Lactose Free' formulas contain cows' milk and are not suitable for CMA.
- 'Comfort' or 'Stay down' formulas are made from cows' milk and are not suitable for CMA.
- Baby formulas based on other animal milks such as goats' milk are not nutritionally suitable and could cause a reaction in babies with CMA.
- Although it is not used as a baby milk formula, it is also important to be aware that rice milk is not recommended for use in children aged under four and a half years.

## Why does my baby's infant formula smell and look different to standard milk?

The specialised formulas used for babies with CMA have slightly different characteristics to standard formula and can look and smell different. It is important not to be put off by this – babies can adapt to different tastes quite well, particularly as their formula provides the only source of nutrition for the first few months of their life.

## What about CMA when my baby is moving on to solids?

At about 4-6 months, you will be starting to think about spoon-feeding your baby. In babies with CMA, it is important to avoid foods that contain milk to prevent an allergic reaction. You will need to carefully read food labels for information about the milk content of most foods, particularly prepared and processed baby foods. Your dietitian will be able to advise you on a range of suitable weaning foods, particularly if your baby has other allergies such as soya or egg allergies. Many of the first-stage foods, such as puréed fruit and vegetables, will be naturally free from cows' milk.



## What should I do when my child grows and moves on from infant formula?

Most baby formulas are designed to be used as the only source of nutrition for the first six months. Then, for the remainder of the first year, they are used as an accompaniment to the diet while the intake of solid food increases. After this, a milk-free diet is continued. It is a good idea to speak to a dietitian or doctor about suitable dairy alternatives as dairy foods provide an important source of calcium. Milk substitutes designed for children aged 1-10 years are available on prescription. It is also important to remember that most children will grow out of their allergy by the time they're about three years old. Again, it is important to speak to your doctor or dietitian about this.

## What exactly is a milk-free diet?

Once your baby starts weaning, you will need to make sure that any foods they are given are free from cows' milk. This will be easier at the start, as 'first foods' such as puréed fruit, vegetables and baby rice are naturally free from cows' milk and, therefore, unlikely to cause an allergic reaction. Babies with a food allergy may react to more than one food, so it is important to remember this during weaning and introduce one new food at a time. This way, foods which may cause a reaction are easier to identify.

As the range of foods that your baby eats grows, you will need to read food labels on packaged and prepared baby foods to check for milk and milk-related ingredients, which might cause an allergic reaction.

While some sources of milk may be obvious, others can be less obvious (see table below).

### When you're shopping, read food labels and watch out for the following products and ingredients which should be avoided on a milk-free diet:

- Buttermilk
- Butter/butter fat/ butter oil
- Casein – this is the protein in milk so look out for:
  - caseinates,
  - hydrolysed casein,
  - sodium caseinate,
  - calcium caseinate,
  - ammonium caseinate,
  - magnesium caseinate, and
  - potassium caseinate;
- Cheese
- Cream or artificial cream
- Curd
- Ghee (clarified butter)
- Hydrolysed whey protein
- Hydrolysed whey sugar
- Lactoglobulin
- Lactoalbumin
- Lactose
- Margarine
- Milk (fresh, UHT, evaporated, condensed, dried)
- Milk solids

## Other tips which are useful when following a milk free diet include:

- Read all food ingredient labels carefully and look out for allergy information. Remember that companies can change the ingredients used in their products so you should check the label **every time** you buy the food. If in doubt – don't buy it!
- Avoid foods which are sold loose and don't have labels. For example, foods from the bakery section or the deli counter.
- Ask supermarkets for 'free from' lists of their own brand foods, or visit the 'free from' aisle for specialist foods.
- Avoid labels stating 'may contain traces of milk' even though your child might never have reacted to the food before.
- Be careful when preparing meals as milk may be transferred to other foods through handling or through the use of contaminated utensils. When in a restaurant, it is a good idea to tell them about your child's allergy, particularly if your child's allergy is severe.

Please note that if a milk-free diet has been recommended, it is important to discuss this with a dietitian who will be able to monitor your child's diet to make sure they get all the nutrients they need.



## Should I give my child any vitamin or mineral supplements if they have a milk allergy?

The specialised infant formulas used to treat CMA contain all the nutrients your baby needs to grow and develop. However, as your baby grows and moves on to solids, some foods are restricted so it is important to make sure they get enough calcium.

If your child has been diagnosed with an allergy and you are concerned about the quality of their diet, ask your GP to refer you to a dietitian.

In the Republic of Ireland, HSE policy recommends that you give your baby a vitamin D supplement. Please talk to your pharmacist, GP, PHN or dietitian for more information.

## Who should I talk to if I think my child has Cows' Milk Allergy?

If you think that your baby might have CMA, talk to your GP as soon as possible. For further information, you may find the following website a helpful resource:

[www.cowsmilkallergy.ie](http://www.cowsmilkallergy.ie)

### Further information

- [www.cowsmilkallergy.ie](http://www.cowsmilkallergy.ie)  
This website has a range of useful information on CMA including symptoms, glossary of terms, a symptom diary and stories from parents whose babies have CMA.
- Get details on the free Cows' Milk Allergy iPhone App on [www.cowsmilkallergy.ie](http://www.cowsmilkallergy.ie)
- Freephone:  
1800 412 414 (ROI)  
or 0800 028 3416 (NI)
- Email: [dietitians.ireland@nutricia.com](mailto:dietitians.ireland@nutricia.com)





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