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The Prevalence of Self-reported Lactose Intolerance and the Consumption of Dairy Foods Among African American Adults Are Less Than Expected

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Abstract

Objective

To determine the self-reported incidence of lactose intolerance and its influence on dairy choices among African American adults.

Design, Setting, and Participants

An online survey closely matched to the 2000 US Census was administered to a nationally representative sample of African Americans (2016 adults) and a comparison sample of the general population (1084 adults). Statistical analyses performed included pair-wise *t* tests for proportion conducted on percent responses at the 95% confidence level.

Results

African Americans were more likely to eat fewer dairy foods, experience physical discomfort after consumption, and believe they were lactose intolerant. While 49% of African Americans had ever experienced "some type of physical discomfort" after eating dairy foods, 24% believed they were lactose intolerant. Within this group, 85% of African Americans would be willing to consume more dairy products if they could avoid lactose intolerance symptoms.

Conclusions and Implications

Dairy food, calcium, and vitamin D intake in African Americans and the general population are below US recommendations. Deficiencies of these nutrients are associated with chronic diseases that disproportionately affect African Americans. In the United States, dairy foods are the primary source of calcium and vitamin D, and lactose intolerance can be a significant barrier to dairy food intake. However, self-described lactose intolerance is less than commonly reported in African American populations. Low dairy intake may reflect concerns about lactose intolerance, other factors such as learned food habits and cultural preferences. Nutrition recommendations for African Americans and the general population should focus on the health benefits of dairy foods, provide culturally sensitive dietary options, and strategies to increase tolerance.



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Keywords

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