



Health and
Social Care

When Cow's Milk Allergy is Suspected



Crying is communicating!

Newborn babies cry, a lot. Crying is the only way they can tell us when something doesn't feel right. Too hot, too cold, hungry, need a fresh nappy or need a cuddle.

Newborn babies also wriggle and grunt and squirm around a lot. They have never had to eat or digest food before, and it can take a few weeks for their bodies to get used to the process of food passing through their body. Sometimes it can seem like they are straining a lot and we can think they are constipated or in pain when it is just a part of the learning process.

Could it be something more?

Some babies can be more unsettled and parents or guardians often wonder if it is something more. Cow's Milk Allergy (CMA) is often suggested.

CMA is caused by an allergy to a part of cows' milk, which is what infant formula or 'baby milk' is made with. Symptoms of CMA can be very like normal baby behaviour; but they tend to last longer, be more severe and don't get better even after trying the usual treatments. There are also usually symptoms from different parts of the body at the same time e.g. rashes and upset tummy together.

Symptoms can include:

- Being irritable or having 'colic' for a long time;
- Reflux or vomiting;
- Refusing or disliking being fed;
- Pain in the tummy;
- Loose or frequent dirty nappies;
- Constipation (especially straining to pass even a soft stool);
- Blood or mucus in the stools;
- Itching of the skin, redness of the skin, a tendency to 'rashes';
- Runny nose or being chesty.



You may be advised to trial a low allergy formula instead of one of the standard ones you buy in the chemist or supermarket. This will be as a trial for 2-4 weeks to see if it helps ease your baby's symptoms.



How will I know if it really is Cow's Milk Allergy (CMA)?

Some of the symptoms of CMA can easily be confused with other conditions and it can take time to work out what is causing these symptoms in your baby.



If your baby's symptoms have improved on the trial (usually 2-4 weeks) of the low allergy formula, this is great news. However, it is important to make sure that the symptoms didn't just improve by coincidence or for some other reason.

This is why you need to give some of the standard infant formula to your baby again (unless your health care professional has advised you not to) to see if the symptoms come back. This will be done slowly, usually over a week, replacing one scoop in the first bottle of the day and increasing as the week goes on.

This is called 'The Early Home Reintroduction to Confirm the Diagnosis of Cow's Milk Allergy'.

Scan the QR code opposite for help on how to complete this.

This is the only way to confirm if CMA was the cause of your baby's symptoms.

Completing this will help you make sure that your baby is on the right treatment for the right condition and will also ensure that your baby does not have to avoid foods that they don't need to.



What to expect

If you are breastfeeding you can continue to feed as normal. CMA is less common in children who are fed breastmilk but it does still happen.

If you are formula feeding, or are mixed feeding, your doctor or other healthcare professional will prescribe you the most suitable low allergy formula milk. This is suitable for an infant with a cow's milk allergy.

Low allergy milks

These formulas have the bits that cause the allergy either broken into chunks or into individual 'building blocks' of the cow's milk so they are less likely to cause an allergic reaction and are tolerated by most babies with a cow's milk allergy. Some low allergy formula is based on rice milk instead of cow's milk.

Some of these may contain prebiotics that promote the growth of good bacteria in the gut and lactose, which improves the taste but may not be suitable for all babies.

Frequent changes to formula should be avoided because a baby's developing digestive system needs time (often 1–2 weeks) to adjust to new proteins and fats. Constant switching can stop the tummy from settling, causing increased gas, fussiness, vomiting, or diarrhoea, and makes it difficult to identify if a specific formula is actually working.

Milk alternatives

Plant-based milks such as soya, oat, pea, coconut and nut milks can be used from six months of age to mix with foods and on cereal but should not be given as the main milk drink until the child is at least 12 months of age because they don't provide all the nutrients a baby needs. Children under four-and-a-half years should not have rice milk.

Animal milks, such as sheep's and goat's milk, are not usually suitable as they are too similar to cow's milk, so are likely to trigger symptoms.

Lactose free cow's milk and lactose free dairy is not suitable because they still contain the part of cow's milk that causes the allergy.

Solid foods

Introducing a baby to solid foods who has CMA should be the same as for a baby who doesn't, but you will need to avoid foods that contain cow's milk or dairy products (e.g. yogurt, fromage frais, cheese, cream or butter). You should aim to start giving solid foods at around 6 months but not before 4 months (17 weeks) of age. If your baby was premature, check with your Dietitian about the best time to start. As your baby grows, you should keep offering different textures and flavours to help your baby learn to like a wide variety of foods. Begin with foods such as root and green vegetables, fruit, rice and potatoes at a texture that is appropriate for your child. Chicken, meat and pulses may be introduced next. Use a little of your baby's usual milk (breast or low allergy formula) to mix the food to the desired consistency.

If your baby has eczema, especially more severe eczema, they are at higher risk for developing other food allergies. You may be given more specific advice about which common allergenic foods to introduce to your baby's diet and when.

Food labels

Cow's milk and derivatives of cow's milk are often added to manufactured foods and may be an unexpected ingredient in many foods. Read labels carefully every time.

Labels must state whether cow's milk (and other common allergens) is present in a product. Look for the word milk in bold in the ingredients label.

For more information go to www.nidirect.gov.uk/cows-milk-allergy.

Date of issue: August 2026

Review date: August 2029

