

# Anemia

## When low blood iron is the cause

### What is anemia?

*Anemia* occurs when your blood doesn't have enough *hemoglobin*. Hemoglobin is a protein in your red blood cells that carries oxygen from your lungs to the rest of your body. All parts of your body need oxygen. Anemia can starve your body of the oxygen it needs to survive.

#### Symptoms of anemia

- Often, no symptoms
- Paleness
- Feeling tired
- Unusual shortness of breath during exercise
- Fast heartbeat

Many things can lead to anemia. Possible causes include vitamin B<sub>12</sub> or folic acid deficiencies and some chronic illnesses. But the most common cause is not having enough iron in your blood. Iron is a mineral the body needs to make hemoglobin. Anemia due to low iron levels is called *iron deficiency anemia*.

### What can lead to low iron levels in the blood?

A number of things can cause your blood to be low in iron.

**Lack of iron in the diet.** This is mostly a problem for children and young women. Children who drink large amounts of milk and avoid iron-rich foods and young women who follow fad diets may be at risk for iron deficiency.

**Growth spurts.** Children under age three are growing so fast that their bodies may have a hard time keeping up with the amount of iron they need.

**Pregnancy.** Women who are pregnant or are breastfeeding need two and one-half times as much iron as men. That's why pregnant women may be tested for anemia and why they need to eat more iron-rich foods or may need to take a daily iron pill.

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**Blood loss.** This is the most common reason for iron deficiency anemia in adults. Women, of course, lose blood every month during their periods. Heavy periods may cause anemia.

Blood loss can also be caused by internal bleeding, usually in the digestive tract. A stomach ulcer, ulcerative colitis, cancer, or taking aspirin or similar medicine for a long time can cause bleeding in your stomach or intestines. That's why it's so important to find the reason for a low iron level.

**How is anemia diagnosed?**

A blood test will probably be done to diagnose anemia. Talk to your doctor if you think you might have anemia. Other tests may be needed to find out what's causing the anemia.

**Can anemia be prevented?**

Some types can, such as those caused by a diet that lacks iron. You can help prevent this type of anemia by making sure you eat foods that contain iron. See the box below for a list of iron-rich foods.

**Foods high in iron**

- Liver and other meats
- Seafood
- Dried fruits like apricots, prunes and raisins
- Nuts
- Beans, especially lima beans
- Green leafy vegetables, such as greens, parsley and broccoli
- Blackstrap molasses
- Whole grains

**How is anemia treated?**

This depends on what's causing the anemia. For example, if anemia results from losing too much blood, the cause of the blood loss will need to be found and treated. If anemia results from a diet that's low in iron, iron-rich foods or iron pills may be the treatment your doctor recommends.

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## How can I increase how much iron I get from my diet?

Only a small amount of the iron in foods is absorbed, or taken in, by your body. Your body best absorbs the iron in meats.

Eating a small amount of meat along with other sources of iron, such as some vegetables, can help you get even more iron out of these foods. Taking vitamin C pills or eating foods high in vitamin C, such as citrus fruits or juice, at the same time you eat iron-rich foods or take your iron pill can help your body absorb the iron better.

Cooking in cast-iron pans will increase the iron content of food.

Some foods block the absorption of iron. These include coffee, tea, egg yolks, milk, fiber and soy protein. Try to avoid these things when you're eating food high in iron.

## Can iron pills cause problems?

Taking iron pills to try to prevent or treat anemia without first talking to your doctor may be harmful. Taking iron if you have anemia may make diagnosing anemia more difficult. It may also cover up a more serious disorder that could be causing the anemia.

Iron pills can also cause stomach upset, heartburn and constipation. Be sure to tell your doctor about any discomfort you notice. The tips in the box below may help reduce this discomfort.

### Tips on taking iron pills

- Take the pills when you eat.
- Start to take iron slowly. Try taking one pill a day for three to five days, then two pills a day until you aren't bothered by that amount. Increase the number of pills until you're taking the amount your doctor has recommended.
- Increase the fiber in your diet if you have constipation. This is worth trying even though fiber may get in the way of how well your body can absorb iron. You'll still be able to absorb some iron, and it's better than not taking any iron if you need it.
- Don't take iron pills at bedtime if they upset your stomach.
- If one type of iron pill causes problems, talk to your doctor about trying a different formula or brand.

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This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.



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