

Hemochromatosis

When your blood has too much iron

What is hemochromatosis?

Hemochromatosis is a blood disease that causes the body to absorb too much iron. This extra iron collects in different parts of the body and may cause damage to the heart, liver, pancreas and joints. This disease occurs most often in white middle-aged men of northern European descent.

What are the symptoms?

Hemochromatosis can cause a variety of symptoms because it can affect different organs. It may cause diabetes, joint pain and weakness. In some people, the skin may turn a brownish color. In serious cases, heart problems or liver problems may occur. Fortunately in most cases, this disease is mild and causes no symptoms at all.

How do I know if I have hemochromatosis?

Hemochromatosis can be detected with certain blood tests. If you have hemochromatosis, your blood tests show that you have too much iron in your blood. If blood tests show that you might have this disease, your doctor may want you to have a liver biopsy. With a liver biopsy, a sample of tissue is surgically removed from your liver and examined under a microscope. This test can help the doctor find out if your body has too much iron.

Can it be treated?

If you have hemochromatosis, your treatment will include making blood donations. Regular donations of a pint of blood is a good way to remove extra iron from your body. When the disease improves and the excess iron is reduced, you will probably only need to have blood taken three or four times each year.

Will I need a special diet?

It's important for people with hemochromatosis to limit their iron intake. Here are some steps you might take:

- Avoid foods that contain iron, such as liver, beef and pork, egg yolks, beans, dried fruits, spinach, greens, broccoli and molasses.
- Avoid foods that have iron added to them, such as breads, cereals and milk.

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- Reduce the amount of vitamin C in your diet. Vitamin C increases the amount of iron that your body absorbs. Sources of vitamin C include citrus fruits (oranges, grapefruit, etc.), tomatoes, potatoes, cabbage and green peppers.
 - Avoid alcoholic beverages. Alcohol worsens liver disease.
 - Don't use iron cookware.
 - Most importantly, don't take vitamins with iron in them.

Is this condition serious?

Hemochromatosis can be easily treated when it is discovered early, before problems occur. Early treatment can prevent damage to important organs such as the heart, liver and pancreas. If the disease isn't treated, it can lead to serious problems such as heart disease and liver cancer. It's very important for people with hemochromatosis to have regular blood tests and to see their doctor regularly.

How can I learn more?

You can contact the following organization to obtain more information about hemochromatosis:



Hemochromatosis Foundation, Inc.
P.O. Box 8569
Albany, NY 12208-0569
Telephone: 518-489-0972



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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