

Patient Information

Anemia During Pregnancy

What is anemia during pregnancy?

Anemia is an abnormally low level of red blood cells and hemoglobin in the blood. It is common during pregnancy.

It is important for your healthcare provider to check for anemia. Severe anemia when you are pregnant may slow your baby's growth or result in a premature delivery. Also, because you are weaker, you will not recover as quickly from bleeding, infections, or other possible complications of delivery.

If you bleed heavily at delivery or you need to have a cesarean section, anemia may make it more likely that you will need a blood transfusion. Having a transfusion increases your risk of infection and other problems caused by transfusions.

How does it occur?

Most anemia during pregnancy results from an increased need for iron. You need more iron because your body is making more blood. Often your diet alone does not provide enough iron to meet your needs. Also, the growing baby takes all the iron it needs from you, regardless of how much you have in your system.

Sometimes anemia during pregnancy is caused by a lack of one of the B vitamins and folic acid. It may also be caused by an inherited medical problem such as sickle cell anemia or thalassemia.

What are the symptoms?

Your symptoms may not be obvious. Or you may think your symptoms are normal symptoms of pregnancy.

Symptoms of anemia include:

- tiring easily
- weakness
- pale skin, gums, eyes, and nail beds
- fast or irregular heartbeat
- shortness of breath
- headache
- lightheadedness
- fainting

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- cravings for starch or ice (a symptom called pica).

How is it diagnosed?

Anemia can be diagnosed with a blood test.

How is it treated?

The treatment depends on why you have anemia. Anemia caused by lack of iron is usually treated with iron tablets. Vitamin deficiencies are treated with vitamin supplements. If you are still anemic even though you are taking supplements, your healthcare provider may give you shots of iron or vitamins.

How can I take care of myself?

Follow your healthcare provider's orders, don't drink or smoke, and take medicines and vitamins as prescribed.

Iron tablets may cause constipation or upset your stomach.

If you have these problems, it may help to:

- Drink more fluids.
- Eat more high-fiber foods, such as fruits, vegetables, cereals, and whole grains (whole grains include wheat, oats, corn, and rice).
- Take your pills at mealtime.

Iron can make your bowel movements very dark or even black in color. If your bowel movements are very dark, don't be concerned. It is not harmful.

What can I do to prevent anemia during pregnancy?

- Take vitamin pills with iron as prescribed by your healthcare provider throughout your pregnancy.
- Don't take iron pills with milk because it may prevent the iron from being absorbed.
- Eat foods high in iron and vitamin C. (Vitamin C helps your body absorb iron.) Often, foods that are high in iron are also good sources of folic acid. Foods that are

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high in iron include:

- liver, kidney, and red meat
- dried beans
- leafy green vegetables
- dried fruits such as raisins, prunes, and apricots
- prune juice
- bread, pasta, cereal, and other foods made from fortified, enriched, or whole grains.

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