

Patient Information

Iron Deficiency Anemia

What is iron deficiency anemia?

Iron deficiency anemia is a condition in which your blood contains less hemoglobin than normal. Hemoglobin is the protein in blood cells that carries oxygen to body tissues.

How does it occur?

Iron deficiency anemia can happen if you do not have enough iron in your diet. Iron is a mineral that is important to all body cells. It is particularly important for blood cells because iron is needed to make hemoglobin. Iron is also needed to help certain chemical processes in the body.

Iron deficiency anemia can be caused by:

- not having enough iron in your diet
- the iron in your diet not being absorbed properly due to a problem with your digestive system
- blood loss (blood loss can be obvious, for example, due to an injury or menstruation, or you can lose small amounts often from a hidden source of bleeding within your body).

Women 19 to 50 years old need 18 mg of iron per day. If you are over age 50, you need about 8 mg a day. Women of childbearing age need twice as much iron in their diet as older women because they lose blood during menstruation. Pregnant women need extra iron for the development of the baby. Iron supplements are therefore often prescribed during pregnancy.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms are:

- tiredness and lack of energy
- headaches
- sore mouth or tongue
- brittle nails
- shortness of breath
- pale skin, gums, and nail beds
- pain in the chest.

How is it diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will probably suspect iron

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deficiency anemia from your medical history and symptoms. A blood test will confirm the diagnosis. If blood loss is a possibility, your healthcare provider may check your stools for blood or get special X-rays of your bowel.

How is it treated?

Iron supplements can be prescribed that will build up your body stores of iron. However, you will need to change your eating habits to be sure of a well-balanced diet in the future. Your healthcare provider may refer you to a nutritionist for dietary advice.

If you have a bleeding problem, you will need special treatment.

Meat, fish, and poultry are excellent sources of dietary iron. It is also present in liver, eggs, green leaf vegetables, nuts, peas, beans, and whole-grain bread. A well-balanced diet contains enough iron for your daily needs.

Iron tablets may have side effects such as abdominal cramps; nausea; constipation; and dark stools. To lessen side effects, your healthcare provider will start you on a low dose of iron and slowly increase your dose to the necessary amount. He or she may suggest that you take vitamin C with the iron pills to help your body absorb the iron. Taking the iron at mealtimes can help prevent stomach and intestinal upset.

Do not take antacids and do not eat or drink any dairy products at the same time you take the iron pills. Antacids and dairy products prevent the body from absorbing iron.

Only rarely are iron shots needed.

How long will the effects last?

The symptoms will respond quickly to treatment and improve in just a few days.

How can I take care of myself?

- Follow your healthcare provider's or nutritionist's

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advice for treating iron deficiency anemia.

- Eat a well-balanced, varied diet. Eat regularly at least 3 times each day.
- See your healthcare provider if you feel tired all of the time or notice any of the other symptoms of iron deficiency anemia.

How can I help prevent iron deficiency anemia?

Eating foods rich in iron and/or taking an iron supplement will help to prevent a recurrence.

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