

Iron Deficiency and Iron Deficiency Anemia in Pregnancy Patient Handout

What is anemia?

Anemia is a condition that affects your red blood cells. It 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. Anemia can starve your body of the oxygen it needs to survive.

Many things can lead to anemia. 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. Some people refer to anemia as "low blood".

Symptoms of anemia

- Often there are no symptoms
- Paleness
- Feeling tired
- More shortness of breath during exercise
- Unusual food cravings (known as pica)
- Fast heartbeat
- Cold hands and feet
- Brittle nails or hair loss
- Headaches
- Dizziness or light-headedness
- Symptoms usually come on slowly so that you feel no sudden change in your energy level

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

Lack of iron in the diet. You may have low iron levels if you don't eat enough foods high in iron. This is mostly a problem for children and young women. Small children who drink large amounts of milk and avoid iron-rich foods and young women who follow fad diets or are vegetarian may be at risk for low iron levels.

Pregnancy. Women who are pregnant or are breastfeeding need more iron. 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.

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.

Inability to absorb iron. The iron in your food is absorbed by the body in the small intestine. Diseases that affect your small intestine's ability to absorb nutrients, such as Crohn's disease or celiac disease, may cause low iron levels in your body. Some foods or medicines, including milk, antacids or stomach acid-lowering medicines, also can reduce your body's ability to absorb iron.

Prevention and Treatment

Eat more foods that are high in iron. 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 high doses of 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 also help your body absorb the iron.

Some foods block the absorption of iron. These include coffee, tea, eggs, milk, fibre, and soy protein. Try to avoid them when you're eating foods high in iron and having them at the same time as your iron pill; separate them by two hours.

Vegetarians need almost twice the daily recommended amount of iron compared with non-vegetarians. Iron from plant-based foods is not absorbed as well by our bodies as animal food sources.

Foods high in iron:

- Liver and red meat
- Seafood (sardines)
- Dried fruits like apricots, prunes, and raisins
- Nuts, tofu, and lentils
- Beans, especially lima and soy beans
- Green leafy vegetables, such as greens, parsley, spinach, and broccoli
- Black strap molasses
- Whole grains
- Iron fortified foods like many breads and cereals (check the label)

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 below may help reduce this discomfort.

Tips on taking iron pills

- Take iron on an empty stomach with full glass of water or citrus juice or vitamin C pill.
- Take the pills with food if you experience nausea and vomiting when taking them on an empty stomach.
- 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.
- Avoid taking calcium, zinc, copper supplement or multivitamins containing any of these minerals within 2 hours of taking iron pills.
- Avoid taking antacids within 2 hours of taking iron pills.
- Increase the fibre in your diet if you have constipation but also increase your water and fluid intake. This is worth trying even though fibre 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 pills causes problems, try a different formula or brand.
- Store iron pills safely. Iron poisoning is a leading cause of accidental death in children. Iron pills often look like candy.

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