

IRON DEFICIENCY ANEMIA

What is it?

Anemia is a condition of the blood where there is a decrease in the number of red blood cells or a decrease in the amount of hemoglobin found in the red blood cells. In order for red blood cells to carry an appropriate amount of oxygen to the rest of the body, there needs to be enough hemoglobin. Hemoglobin relies on iron to help it carry oxygen. A lack of iron in the diet decreases the body's ability to carry oxygen and results in certain (or maybe no) symptoms.

There are several ways that iron deficiency can occur. The simplest is a lack of adequate iron in the diet. Sometimes young adults need more iron during an adolescent growth spurt. Pregnancy increases the demand for iron due to an increase in the blood supply and the demands of the fetus. Heavy menstrual bleeding also results in a loss of iron. If a person has GI bleeding due to perhaps an ulcer or cancer, iron may also be lost this way. Finally, iron may not be absorbed efficiently by the gut (malabsorption).

People with GI disease, ulcers, diverticulitis, cancer, colitis, hemorrhoids and heavy menstrual or uterine bleeding need to watch for signs of iron deficiency anemia.

Signs and symptoms:

- * Feeling tired.
- * Weakness.
- * Pale skin. Check gums, eyelid linings, hands and nails.
- * Sometimes other more rare symptoms will appear such as an inflamed tongue, fainting, being short of breath, fast heartbeat, decreased appetite, stomach pain and discomfort, abnormal food cravings (pale, dirt, laundry starch) or increased infections.

Treatment:

- * Iron supplements usually correct the problem adequately.
- * The underlying cause must be identified and corrected if possible.
- * Avoid situations that could cause infection.
- * Continue adequate iron intake through a good diet. Eat adequate leafy greens, beans and meat.
- * Keep up any activities you were doing before diagnosis. You may feel too tired, however, to keep up the pace until adequate iron levels are reached. Rest if you feel the need.

Instructions for taking iron supplements:

- * To get the best absorption of iron, try to take your supplement at least 1/2 hour before meals and on an empty stomach. Sometimes iron can upset your stomach. If this occurs, take it with a small amount of food. Tell your doctor when this happens because there are different supplements available and one may be better tolerated than another.
- * Wait at least 2 hours after taking iron before taking other medications. Antacids and tetracyclines interfere with the body's absorption of iron.
- * Milk products shouldn't be taken with iron as they decrease iron's absorption. Try to drink less than 1 pint of milk a day.
- * Side effects of iron supplements include dark stools, stomach upset, diarrhea or constipation. Foods with lots of fiber will help prevent constipation.
- * Keep your iron supplements away from children! Excess iron in the very young is dangerous.
- * Your doctor may tell you to keep taking the iron for at least 2-3 months after your blood levels come back to normal.