

Anemia, Iron Deficiency

Why do I need iron in my diet?

Iron is needed by your body in order to make hemoglobin and myoglobin. Hemoglobin is the oxygen-carrying red-colored protein in blood cells ("hem" means iron). Myoglobin is the oxygen-carrying protein in muscle cells. 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 11 to 50 years old need 18 mg of iron per day. Women over age 50 need 10 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 foods contain iron?

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.

What are the symptoms of iron deficiency anemia?

The symptoms are:

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

How is it diagnosed?

Your health care provider will probably suspect iron deficiency anemia from your medical history and symptoms. A blood test will confirm the diagnosis. If blood loss is a possibility, your health care 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 health care provider may refer you to a nutritionist for dietary advice. If you have a bleeding problem, you will need special treatment.

How can I take care of myself?

- Follow your health care provider's or nutritionist's advice for treating iron deficiency anemia.
- Eat a well-balanced, varied diet. Eat regularly at least 3 times each day.
- See your health care provider if you feel tired all the time or notice any of the other symptoms of iron deficiency anemia.

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