

Iron Deficiency Anemia

What is iron deficiency anemia?

Anemia (ah-NEE-me-uh) is a condition that affects your red blood cells. These cells carry oxygen from your lungs to the rest of your body. Hemoglobin (HEE-moh-glow-bin) is the protein in red blood cells that allows them to carry oxygen. Your body needs iron to make hemoglobin.

People who have anemia don't have enough hemoglobin. The most common cause of anemia is when your body doesn't make enough hemoglobin because it doesn't have enough iron. This is called iron deficiency anemia.

What causes it?

Some children with iron deficiency anemia do not get enough iron in their diet, but this is not a common cause in adults. In women, heavy blood loss during menstrual periods can cause iron deficiency anemia. In men and postmenopausal women, it can be a warning sign of ulcers or cancer.

How do I know if I have it?

People with iron deficiency anemia often do not have any symptoms. As the condition gets worse, you might feel tired or dizzy, have trouble catching your breath, have a fast heartbeat, or have unusual cravings (such as for ice). It is important to talk to your doctor if you think you have anemia. He or she will need to do a blood test.

Who should be screened for it?

All children should be tested before their first birthday. Pregnant women should be screened at their first prenatal visit.

How is it treated?

The first step is to find out what is causing the iron deficiency. Men and postmenopausal women may need to have their stomach and intestines examined to make sure that they do not have any hidden bleeding. This is especially important in older adults because colon cancer can cause iron deficiency anemia. Premenopausal women will be examined for gynecologic causes. Pregnant women and children with iron deficiency should take iron pills.

How can I keep from getting it?

Some causes of iron deficiency anemia can be prevented. If you aren't getting enough iron in your diet, try eating small amounts of meat or other foods high in iron (such as dried apricots, prunes, nuts, lima beans, spinach, and broccoli). Babies can have formula with extra iron, and can start eating iron-fortified foods at four to six months of age. Pregnant women can take prenatal vitamins that contain a small amount of iron.



Iron Deficiency Anemia *(continued)*

Where can I get more information?

Your doctor

AAFP's Patient Education Resource

Web site: <http://familydoctor.org/familydoctor/en/diseases-conditions/anemia.html>

Mayo Clinic

Web site: <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/iron-deficiency-anemia/DS00323>

National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute

Web site: <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/health-topics/topics/ida/>

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Notes:

This handout is provided to you by your family doctor and the American Academy of Family Physicians. Other health-related information is available from the AAFP online at <http://familydoctor.org>.

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