

# **Iron-Deficiency Anemia**

#### What is it?

Anemia is a condition in which your blood doesn't have enough red blood cells. Red blood cells carry oxygen to your body organs. If you don't have enough red blood cells, your body doesn't get enough oxygen. This may cause you to look pale and feel tired, or you may not have any symptoms at first.

**Iron-deficiency anemia** develops when your body has not had enough iron for a long time. Iron is a key part of **hemoglobin**, the substance in red blood cells that carries the oxygen through your body. Not having enough iron for a long time prevents your body from making enough red blood cells.

#### What causes it?

Anemia can be caused by a number of different conditions, such as internal bleeding, other vitamin deficiencies, or chronic illness. Iron deficiency is the most common cause, though. Many people, including about 20 percent of women, don't have enough iron in their bodies.

There are a number of reasons you could develop iron-deficiency anemia. These include:

- Blood loss, especially in women who lose a lot of blood during heavy menstrual periods.
- · Not enough iron in your diet.
- Inability to absorb enough iron from foods, especially in people who have digestive tract diseases, ongoing blood loss from another health condition, or have had gastric bi-pass surgery.
- **Increased need for iron**, especially in children who are growing rapidly or pregnant women who need iron for their baby.



#### What are the symptoms?

Anemia begins gradually, and at first you may not have any symptoms. As your anemia worsens, your anemia may cause you to:

- **Have low energy** and feel tired, weak, dizzy, irritable, depressed, or have trouble concentrating.
- Have physical symptoms such as pale skin, brittle nails, shortness of breath, chest pain, cold hands or feet, or an irregular heartbeat.
- Want to eat unusual things such as ice, paper, dirt, clay, or pure starch.

### What if it goes untreated?

If your anemia goes untreated, it can cause serious complications. When you don't have enough red blood cells, your heart has to work harder to get enough oxygen to your organs. In fact, your heart is working harder even before you have noticeable symptoms. This extra work can make the wall of your heart muscle thicken, a condition called LVH (left ventricular hypertophy). LVH is serious, and can require hospitalization and sometimes cause death. Treating your anemia right away is essential.

# How is it diagnosed?

If you or your doctor think you may have anemia, you'll be give a blood test called a **complete blood count (CBC)**. This determines your blood level of hemoglobin.

If the CBC test shows that you have anemia, your doctor will perform other tests to determine what's causing your anemia, how severe it is, and what the best treatment would be.

#### How is it treated?

If iron deficiency is the cause of your anemia, you may be treated in the following ways:

- **Iron supplements.** Be sure to take your iron supplements exactly as directed.
  - Iron supplements are absorbed best if taken one hour before meals. Taking them before you eat, though, may give you an upset stomach or constipation.
    Talk with your doctor about the best way to handle side effects.
  - Some people have digestive problems when they take iron. If you can't tolerate iron supplements taken by mouth, you may be given iron intravenously or as an injection in to a muscle.
  - It usually takes about 2 to 3 weeks of regular iron supplements before your symptoms start to improve.
  - You may need to keep taking iron for several months to build up your reserves of iron and prevent your anemia from returning. Take your pills for as long as your doctor recommends, even if your symptoms have improved.
- **Diet and nutrition**. Eating more iron-rich foods is a good, natural way to improve your health. Even if you eat more iron, though, most people with anemia still need to take iron supplements.

- Iron rich foods include red meat (especially liver), egg yolks, fish, peas and beans, chicken, and whole-grain bread.
- Do not drink milk or take antacids at the same time as your iron supplements. They may interfere with absorption of the iron.
- Vitamin C may increase the absorption of iron, and also helps your body produce hemoglobin. Ask your doctor if you should be taking it.

## How long will my treatment last?

With treatment, most people recover from iron-deficiency anemia in 2 to 3 months. You may need to take iron supplements for several months longer, though, to build up your reserves of iron.

## How can I keep from getting it again?

The most common reason for iron supplements not working is that the they are not taken, or not taken correctly. Be sure to follow your doctor's recommendations exactly, even if you're feeling better.

During times when your body needs more iron, such as pregnancy, increase the amount of iron in your diet or ask your doctor if you should take iron supplements.

# When should I call my doctor?

Check with your doctor if:

- You experience the symptoms of anemia, or think for any reason that you may have anemia.
- You notice blood in your stool.