

# Health Information Sheet

---

## Anemia, Iron-Deficiency

### BASIC INFORMATION

#### ***Description***

A decreased number of circulating blood cells or insufficient hemoglobin in the cells. Anemia is a result of other disorders. For proper treatment, the cause must be found.

#### ***Frequent signs and symptoms***

- Initially there may be no symptoms.

#### **Signs of pronounced anemia include:**

- Tiredness and weakness.
- Paleness, especially in the hands and lining of the lower eyelids.

#### **Less common signs include:**

- Tongue inflammation.
- Fainting.
- Breathlessness.
- Rapid heartbeat.
- Appetite loss.
- Abdominal discomfort.
- Cravings for ice, paint or dirt.
- Susceptibility to infection.

#### ***Causes***

Decreased absorption of iron or increased need for iron. Causes in adolescents and adults include:

- Rapid growth spurts.
- Heavy menstrual bleeding.
- Pregnancy.
- Malabsorption.
- Gastrointestinal disease with bleeding, including cancer.

#### ***Risk increase with***

- Poor nutrition.
- Age over 60.
- Recent illness, such as an ulcer, diverticulitis, colitis, hemorrhoids or gastrointestinal tumors.

## ***Preventive measures***

- Maintain an adequate iron intake through a well-balanced diet or iron supplements.
- Correction of gynecologic or other problems causing excess blood loss.

## ***Expected outcomes***

Usually curable with iron supplements if the underlying cause can be identified and cured.

## ***Possible complications***

- Failure to diagnose a bleeding malignancy.
- Angina pectoris (pain or pressure beneath the breastbone caused by inadequate blood supply to the heart) or congestive heart failure (pumping action of the heart is insufficient) may develop as a result of marked iron deficiency.

## **TREATMENT**

### ***General measures***

- The most important part of treatment for iron-deficiency anemia is to correct the underlying cause. Iron deficiency can be treated well with iron supplements.
- Avoid risk of infections.
- Additional information is available from the National Heart, Lung & Blood Institute, Communications & Public Information Branch, National Institutes of Health, Building 31, Room 41-21, 9000 Rockville Pike, Bethesda, MD 20892.

### ***Medications***

#### **Iron supplements:**

- Take iron on an empty stomach (at least ½ hour before meals) for best absorption. If it upsets your stomach, you may take it with a small amount of food (except milk).
- If you take other medication, wait at least 2 hours after taking iron before taking them. Antacids and tetracyclines especially interfere with iron absorption.
- Iron supplements may cause black bowel movements, diarrhea or constipation.
- Continue iron supplements until 2 to 3 months after blood test return to normal.
- Too much iron is dangerous. A bottle of iron tablets can poison a child. Keep iron supplements out of the reach of children.

### ***Activity***

No restrictions. You may need to pace activities until symptoms of fatigue are gone.

## ***Diet***

- Adults should limit milk to 1 pint a day. It interferes with iron absorption.
- Eat iron-containing foods, including meat, beans and leafy green vegetables.
- Increase dietary fiber to prevent constipation.

## NOTIFY OUR OFFICE IF

- You or a family member has symptoms of anemia.
- Nausea, vomiting, fever, stomach pain, severe diarrhea or constipation occur during treatment.