

Iron-deficiency Anemia

Iron-deficiency anemia is the most common type of anemia, a condition that happens when your body does not make enough healthy red blood cells or the blood cells do not work correctly. Iron-deficiency anemia happens when you don't have enough iron in your body. Your body needs iron to make a type of red blood cell that carries oxygen through your blood to all parts of your body.

Q: Who gets iron-deficiency anemia?

A: Iron-deficiency anemia affects more women than men. The risk of iron-deficiency anemia is highest for women who:

- **Are pregnant.** Iron-deficiency anemia affects one in six pregnant women. You need more iron during pregnancy to support your unborn baby's development.
- **Have heavy menstrual periods.** Up to 5% of women of childbearing age develop iron-deficiency anemia because of heavy bleeding during their periods.

Infants, small children, and teens are also at high risk for iron-deficiency anemia.

Q: What are the symptoms of iron-deficiency anemia?

A: Iron-deficiency anemia often develops slowly, and symptoms may be mild at first. As the condition gets worse, you may notice symptoms including:

- Fatigue (very common)
- Weakness (very common)
- Dizziness
- Headaches
- Low body temperature

- Pale or yellow “sallow” skin
- Rapid or irregular heartbeat
- Shortness of breath or chest pain, especially with physical activity
- Brittle nails
- Pica (unusual cravings for ice, very cold drinks, or non-food items like dirt or paper)

Q: What causes iron-deficiency anemia?

A: Women can have low iron levels for several reasons, including:

- **Iron lost through bleeding**, which may be caused by:
 - Digestive system problems, such as ulcers, colon polyps, or colon cancer
 - Regular, long-term use of aspirin and other over-the-counter pain relievers
 - Donating blood too often or without enough time in between donations for your body to recover
 - Heavier or longer-than-normal menstrual periods
 - Uterine fibroids, which are noncancerous growths in the uterus that can cause heavy bleeding
- **Increased need for iron during pregnancy.**
- **Not eating enough food that contains iron.** Your body absorbs the iron in animal-based foods, such as meat, chicken, and fish, two to three times better than the iron in plant-based foods.
- **Problems absorbing iron.** Certain health conditions, such as Crohn's disease or celiac disease, can make it harder for your body to absorb iron from food.

Q: How can I prevent iron-deficiency anemia?

A: You can help prevent iron-deficiency anemia with the following steps:

- **Treat the cause of blood loss.** Talk to your doctor if you have heavy menstrual periods or if you have digestive system problems, such as frequent diarrhea or blood in your stool.
- **Eat foods with iron.** Good sources of iron include lean meat and chicken, dark, leafy vegetables, and beans.
- **Eat and drink foods that help your body absorb iron,** like orange juice, strawberries, broccoli, or other fruits and vegetables with vitamin C.
- **Make healthy food choices.** Most people who make healthy, balanced food choices get the iron and vitamins their bodies need from the foods they eat.
- **Avoid drinking coffee or tea with meals.** These drinks make it harder for your body to absorb iron.
- **Talk to your doctor if you take calcium pills.** Calcium can make it harder for your body to absorb iron.

For more information...

For more information about iron-deficiency anemia, call the OWH Helpline at 800-994-9662 or contact the following organizations:

National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI), NIH, HHS

301-592-8573 • www.nhlbi.nih.gov

Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics

800-877-1600 • www.eatright.org

Iron Disorders Institute

888-565-4766 • www.irondisorders.org

The Office on Women's Health is grateful for the additional reviews by:

- Harvey Luksenburg, M.D., Special Advisor to the Director, Division of Blood Diseases and Resources, National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, National Institutes of Health
- Deepa Sekhar, M.D., Hematologist, Assistant Professor, College of Medicine, Penn State University
- Cheryl Garrison, Certified Iron Educator for Iron-Out-of-Balance™, Executive Director, Iron Disorders Institute

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