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## Anemia: When Low Iron Is the Cause

### What is anemia?

Anemia is a condition that affects your red blood cells. Your red blood cells carry oxygen from your lungs to the rest of your body. Hemoglobin is the protein in red blood cells that allows them to carry oxygen. Your body needs iron in order to make hemoglobin.

People who have anemia don't have enough hemoglobin. A 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.

There are several other types of anemia, but iron deficiency anemia is the most common.

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### What can cause low iron levels?

A number of things can cause low iron levels in your body:

**Diet.** You may have low iron levels if you don't eat enough foods high in iron (see box below). This is mostly a problem for children, young women who follow "fad" diets and people who don't eat meat.

**Inability to absorb iron.** The iron in your food is absorbed by the body in the small intestine. Diseases that affect your small intestine's ability to absorb nutrients, such as Crohn's disease or celiac disease, may cause low iron levels in your body. Some foods or medicines, including milk, antacids or stomach acid-lowering medicines, also can prevent your body from absorbing iron.

**Growth spurts.** Children younger than 3 years of age grow so fast that their bodies may have a hard time keeping up with the amount of iron they need.

**Pregnancy.** Women who are pregnant or who are breastfeeding need more iron than women who are not pregnant or breastfeeding. That's why pregnant women often are tested for anemia and why they need to eat more iron-rich foods or take a daily iron pill.

**Blood loss.** Heavy periods may cause low iron levels in women. Internal bleeding, usually in the digestive tract, also can cause blood loss. A stomach ulcer, ulcerative colitis, cancer, or taking aspirin or similar medicine for a long time can cause bleeding in your stomach or intestines.

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### Symptoms of anemia

- Often, no symptoms
- Paleness
- Feeling tired

- Unusual shortness of breath during exercise
- Unusual food cravings (known as pica)
- Fast heartbeat
- Cold hands and feet
- Brittle nails or hair loss
- Headaches
- Dizziness or lightheadedness

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## How is anemia diagnosed?

Talk to your doctor if you think you might have anemia. To diagnose anemia, your doctor will probably test your blood. If you have anemia, your doctor may need to do other tests to find out what's causing it.

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## How is anemia treated?

Treatment depends on what's causing your anemia. For example, if anemia results from losing too much blood, your doctor will need to treat the cause of your blood loss. If anemia results from your diet being too low in iron, your doctor may recommend a change in your diet or iron pills.

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## Can anemia be prevented?

Some types of anemia can be prevented, such as those caused by diet. You can help prevent this type of anemia by increasing the amount of iron in your diet.

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## How can I increase the iron in my diet?

Eat more foods that are high in iron (see the box below for a list). Your body best absorbs iron that comes from meat. Eating a small amount of meat along with other sources of iron, such as certain vegetables, can help you get even more iron out of these foods. Taking vitamin C pills or eating foods high in vitamin C, such as citrus fruits or juice, at the same time you eat iron-rich foods or take your iron pill can also help your body absorb the iron.

Some foods prevent your body from absorbing iron, including coffee, tea, egg whites, milk, fiber and soy protein. Try to avoid these foods when you're eating food high in iron.

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## Foods high in iron

- Liver
- Red meat
- Seafood
- Dried fruits such as apricots, prunes and raisins
- Nuts
- Beans, especially lima beans

- Green leafy vegetables, such as spinach and broccoli
- Blackstrap molasses
- Whole grains
- Iron-fortified foods like many breads and cereals (check the label)

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## Can iron pills cause problems?

Iron pills can cause stomach upset, heartburn and constipation. Be sure to tell your doctor about any discomfort you notice. The tips below may help reduce discomfort.

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## Tips on taking iron pills

- Take the pills with food.
- Start slowly. Try taking 1 pill a day for 3 to 5 days, then 2 pills a day until you aren't bothered by that amount. Increase the number of pills until you're taking the amount your doctor recommended.
- Increase the fiber in your diet if you have constipation. This is worth trying, even though fiber may get in the way of how well your body can absorb iron. You'll still be able to absorb some iron, and it's better than not taking any iron if you need it.
- Don't take iron pills at bedtime if they upset your stomach.
- If one type of iron pill causes problems, talk to your doctor about trying a different formula or brand.

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## Source

[Written by familydoctor.org editorial staff.](#)

American Academy of Family Physicians

Reviewed/Updated: 09/10

Created: 01/96

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