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.

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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

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