

Iron-Deficiency Anemia

What is iron-deficiency anemia?

Anemia [uh-NEE-mee-uh] 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.

Iron-deficiency anemia develops when your body has not had enough iron for a long time. Iron is a key part of **hemoglobin**, the part of a red blood cell that carries the oxygen through your body. When you don't have enough iron for a long time, your body can't make enough red blood cells.

What causes it?

Anemia can be caused by a number of different conditions, such as internal bleeding, heavy menstrual bleeding, lack of certain vitamins, or a long-lasting illness. Iron deficiency is the most common cause, though. About 1 in every 5 women don't have enough iron in their bodies.

Reasons you can get iron-deficiency anemia include:

- **Blood loss**, especially in women who lose a lot of blood during menstrual periods.
- **Not enough iron in your diet.**
- **Difficulty absorbing enough iron from foods**, especially in people who have digestive tract (gut) diseases, ongoing blood loss from another health condition, or have had gastric bypass surgery.
- **Increased need for iron**, especially in children who are growing rapidly or pregnant women who need iron for their baby.



What do I need to do next?

- 1 Treat anemia right away to prevent other health problems.
- 2 If recommended, take iron supplements exactly as directed by your doctor.
- 3 Eat more iron-rich foods.



What are the symptoms?

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

- **Have low energy** and feel tired, weak, dizzy, irritable, depressed, or have trouble concentrating.
- **Have physical signs and 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, 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 **left ventricular** [ven-TRIK-yuh-ler] **hypertrophy** [hi-PUR-truh-fee]—or **LVH**. LVH is serious and can require hospitalization and sometimes cause death. Treating your anemia right away is necessary.

How is iron-deficiency anemia diagnosed?

If you or your doctor thinks you may have anemia, you'll get 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?

Iron-deficiency anemia may be treated with:

- **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, may give you an upset stomach or constipation. Talk with your doctor about the best way to handle these side effects.
 - If you can't tolerate iron supplements taken by mouth, you may be given iron intravenously (through a tube inserted into a vein) or as an injection in a muscle.
 - It usually takes 2 to 3 weeks of taking regular iron supplements before your symptoms start to improve.
 - You may need to keep taking iron for several months to build up your iron reserves and keep 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, beans, dark green vegetables, broccoli, chicken, and whole-grain bread.
 - Vitamin C may increase the absorption of iron and also helps your body produce hemoglobin. Ask your doctor if you should be taking it.
 - Do not drink milk or take antacids at the same time as your iron supplements. They may interfere with absorption of the iron.

How can I keep from getting it again?

The most common reason for iron supplements not working is that 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 during pregnancy, increase the amount 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.

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