

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:
 - o Digestive system problems, such as ulcers, colon polyps, or colon cancer
 - o Regular, long-term use of aspirin and other over-the-counter pain relievers
 - o Donating blood too often or without enough time in between donations for your body to recover
 - o Heavier or longer-than-normal menstrual periods
 - o 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

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