



The Center for Women

Obstetrics & Gynecology

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Iron Deficiency Anemia

What is iron deficiency anemia?

Iron deficiency anemia occurs when your body doesn't have enough iron. Iron is important because it helps you get enough oxygen throughout your body.

What causes iron deficiency anemia?

Iron deficiency anemia is caused by low levels of iron in the body. You might have low iron levels because you:

- Are having heavy menstrual bleeding
- Are not eating enough iron in your foods. Small children, teen and pregnancy women need a lot of iron.
- Internal bleeding caused by ulcers, hemorrhoids, cancer or regular aspirin use.
- Are not absorbing the iron well into your body.

What are the symptoms?

There are symptoms of anemia but they usually are not noticed until your anemia gets worse because of it's slow development. The symptoms could be:

- Feel weak or tire out more easily;
- Feel dizzy;
- Be cranky;
- Have headaches;
- Have a very pale skin;
- Feel short of breath;
- Have trouble concentrating.

How is iron deficiency anemia diagnosed?

After a physical exam by a physician, blood test may be ordered to look at the red blood cell count and iron amounts.

How is it treated?

Iron supplement pills can treat your anemia and then have additional blood work to see if your levels are increasing. Most people begin to feel better after taking the iron supplement after a few days but do not stop taking them until your physician instructs you to stop. It takes a good amount of time to increase the iron in your body.

Your physician may refer patients to a specialist to treat a specific problem if it is found causing the anemia.

Do not take iron pills on your own without seeing your doctor first. If you take iron pills without talking with your doctor first, the pills may cause you to have too much iron in your blood, or even iron poisoning. Your low iron level may be caused by a serious problem that needs more attention than just taking the iron supplement.

You can get the most benefit from iron pills if you take them with vitamin C or drink orange juice. Do not take your iron pills with milk, caffeine, foods with high fiber, or antacids.

Can you prevent iron deficiency anemia?

You can prevent anemia by eating the right amount of iron every day. Iron-rich foods include meats, eggs, and whole-grain or iron-fortified foods. You can also get iron from many other foods, including peas, beans, oatmeal, prunes, and figs.

If you are pregnant, you can prevent anemia by taking prenatal vitamins. Your doctor will give you prenatal vitamins that include iron. Your doctor will also test your blood to see if you are anemic. If you are anemic, you will take a higher-dose iron pill possibly in addition to the prenatal vitamins.