

Iron Deficiency

Have you been feeling tired and sluggish? Are you irritable and restless? Maybe you're experiencing headaches more often and have noticed a shortness of breath and paling of your skin. If so, you are not alone, and may have iron-poor blood, or iron-deficiency anemia.

Severely depleted iron stores and low hemoglobin concentration characterize iron-deficiency anemia. This nutritional deficiency is particularly common among women of childbearing age.

Causes and Risk Factors

Women are generally at an increased risk for iron deficiency due to biological occurrences such as pregnancy, which increases blood volume, and menstruation, which results in blood loss. When blood is lost, iron is lost, and menstrual cycle losses make a woman's iron needs twice that of a man's. It is often difficult to replace this iron because women generally eat less iron-rich foods than men do.

Blood donations are another common contributor to iron deficiency. Ulcers and other diseases can cause blood loss from the gastro-intestinal tract.

Iron Intake

Food is the best source of iron for your body. The most efficient way to get iron is by eating meat, but leafy green vegetables, dried beans, dried fruits, nuts and whole grains are also good sources. If you need additional iron, take it in supplement form.

The National Research Council has developed the following set of recommendations regarding iron intake.

Average Daily Requirement

Adult men	10 mgs
Pregnant women	30 mgs
Teenage girls & women	15 mgs

See your doctor first if you think you need to take an iron supplement. Don't try to diagnose yourself; feeling tired doesn't mean you're anemic. Your doctor can tell for sure through a simple blood test.



Supplementing



Since your body has no way of getting rid of excess iron other than through bleeding, supplements should not be taken unless your doctor suggests they're necessary.

Iron can build up in your body, and taking too much can poison your liver and other organs. Signs of iron toxicity include stomach upset, nausea, diarrhea, and weight loss. An acute iron overdose can even be fatal.

When a supplement is prescribed, make sure it contains at least 15 milligrams of elemental iron. Brand names like Geritol, FemIron, or One-A-Day Plus Iron are fine, but their generic cousins are just as effective and less expensive.

Iron comes in many different forms. Ferrous sulfate is the type most easily absorbed. Other acceptable forms include ferroglycine sulfate, ferrous gluconate, ferrous fumarate, ferrous lactate, ferrous glutamate, and ferrous succinate.

Keep in mind that you may be sensitive to one form of supplemental iron. If taking one kind of pill upsets your stomach, try another. Taking the supplement with meals may limit the chances of stomach upset. And remember that washing the pill down with a glass of orange juice can help improve its rate of absorption.



Prevention

The good news is that anemia can be reversed by changing your diet and meal preparation techniques.

Here are a few tips to help you strike it iron-rich at mealtime:

GARNISH DISHES WITH LEAN MEAT. Stir-frying broccoli with a little chicken or beef means you'll absorb more of the iron from the vegetable.

COOK IT RIGHT. Steaming or microwaving vegetables instead of boiling them will retain more iron.

USE AN IRON POT. It will increase the iron content in foods. The more acidic a food is - tomato sauce is a good example - the more iron will leach from the pot while it's cooking.

EAT PLENTY OF VITAMIN C. Anything that has lots of vitamin C, such as orange juice, cantaloupe, peppers, cauliflower, and Brussels sprouts, can boost the amount of iron you can absorb.



AVOID FOODS THAT HINDER IRON ABSORPTION. At least while eating an iron-rich meal. Coffee, tea, and milk considerably reduce any gain from iron by interfering with its absorption.



MAKE YOUR OWN DESSERTS. Processed baked goods are usually made from refined flour and have lost most of their iron. Use whole grains and enriched flours to lock in the mineral.

Remember these important facts about iron...

- ◆ The body needs vitamin C to help absorb iron.
- ◆ Cooking with a cast-iron pan can increase the iron content of food.
- ◆ Avoid caffeine - it blocks iron (and calcium) absorption.
- ◆ Always try to meet your iron needs through eating foods high in iron. Supplementing should be a last resort.



Foods Rich in Iron

Protein Foods

- Meats, 3 oz of. . .

- Beef, pork, chicken, fish, liver, liver sausage, tuna fish, turkey, and oysters



- Nuts, 1 oz, of . . .

- Peanuts, butternuts, walnuts, almonds, sunflower seed

- Dried Peas and Beans, 1 cup of. . .

- Pinto beans, split peas, lentils, lima beans, kidney beans

Fruits and Vegetables

- Spinach, parsley, sauerkraut, peas, potatoes, broccoli, green beans, asparagus



- Dried peaches, prune juice, prunes, dried apricots, raisins

Breads and Cereals

- Whole grain cereals, whole grain breads, whole wheat pastas, enriched pastas, brewer's yeast, wheat germ

