

PATIENT EDUCATION HANDOUT

Iron Deficiency Anemia

Johnson Ong, DO; Amanda Frugoli, DO, FACOI; Lynn Kong, MD

Paula Gregory, DO, MBA, FACOFP, Editor • Lindsay Tjattas-Saleski, DO, MBA, FACOEP, Health Literacy Editor

WHAT IS ANEMIA?

Anemia is a condition where your body does not have enough red blood cells to circulate oxygen in the body. There are many different types of anemia, but the most common type is iron deficiency anemia. Iron is an essential component for red blood cells and is needed to make blood. It is usually found in the foods that we eat, but some people need supplementation.

WHO IS AT RISK?

The following groups could be at increased risk of developing iron deficiency anemia:

- Young children who drink mostly cow's milk
- Menstruating women, especially with heavy periods
- Pregnant women, due to an increased need to support the growth of a developing baby
- Vegetarians/vegans, as their specific diet may be lacking in iron-rich foods, such as meat and fish
- Frequent blood donors who donate blood as often as every 8 weeks
- People with recent surgery
- People with gastrointestinal disorders that result in malabsorption
- People with acute or chronic gastrointestinal bleeding
- People with certain cancers that increase blood loss

Common symptoms include:

Chronic fatigue or lack of energy
Dizziness or light-headedness
Craving to eat non-food items, like ice or dirt
Shortness of breath

Common signs include:

Pale or yellow-tinged skin
Brittle nails or hair loss
Swollen or sore tongue
Restless legs

WHAT SHOULD I DO?

First, talk to your doctor if you think you are experiencing these signs and symptoms. The diagnosis of iron deficiency is determined by a simple blood test. If you are determined to have iron deficiency, you may need additional testing to determine if you are having bleeding within the stomach, small intestine or large intestine.

Treatment Options:

Diet: One solution is to increase your iron intake through the food you eat. Foods that have high iron content are lean meats including beef, pork or lamb, as well as seafood, such as oysters, shellfish and sardines. Leafy green vegetables, such as broccoli and kale, and legumes, such as peas and pinto beans, are also good sources of iron.

Supplementation: Oral iron supplementation may be recommended. Your doctor will determine how much and how often you will be taking iron. Iron tablets may cause an upset stomach including nausea, vomiting or constipation.

Infusions: Iron can be given as an infusion when oral supplementation is not effective. If the anemia is significant, blood transfusions may also be indicated.

SOURCES:

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