

## Iron deficiency anaemia

### What is it?

Iron deficiency anaemia is a shortage of haemoglobin (the red coloured substance in your blood) due to a lack of iron.

### What are the symptoms?

Lack of the red colour may make you look pale.

Haemoglobin carries oxygen around the body. If there is not enough oxygen in your blood you may become breathless.

### What causes it?

Your body needs iron to make the haemoglobin. The main reasons why you might not have enough iron are:-

#### 1) You are not taking in enough iron in your food

This is usually due to a faulty diet. The best source of iron is red meat. It is also found in peas, beans and lentils, oily fish such as sardines, eggs, bread, green vegetables and fortified breakfast cereals. You may not be eating iron-rich foods because:-

- you have poor teeth or ill-fitting dentures,
- you have arthritic hands or other disabilities which make it difficult to prepare these foods,
- you do not like these foods.

You can also become short of iron over a period of time if you have:-

- difficulty with swallowing,
- poor appetite because food makes you feel sick,
- unusual eating habits, such as living on cups of tea and biscuits.

#### 2) You are not absorbing the iron from a normal diet

#### 3) You are losing too much iron from the body

The most common cause is bleeding. This is usually from the gullet, stomach or the lower part of the bowel. Tiny amounts of blood may be lost each day but, over a period of time, this depletes the body of iron.

continued

# Iron deficiency anaemia - continued

The following conditions can cause you to lose blood:-

- mild irritation of the upper part of the digestive system by tablets. Tablets for arthritis often have this effect.
- more severe conditions, like ulceration.
- simple conditions, like piles.

We are not usually worried if there is slight anaemia in an older person, as this is expected. However, if we suspect you have severe anaemia, or the anaemia is becoming steadily worse, we will carry out tests to find out why it is happening. You may need:-

- a test to look for blood in the bowel motions. This is a simple test but not very reliable.
- an examination of the gullet and stomach with a flexible telescope (a gastroscopy). Most people are not in any way upset by these tests and have no side-effects.
- a barium X-ray, if we need to examine the lower bowel. For this test you need to empty the bowel beforehand, so that barium liquid can be run into the bowel while X-rays are taken. It can be quite uncomfortable for some people, as the liquid can cause cramps in the tummy. Medicines can be given which immediately relieve the cramps.
- an examination of the lower bowel with a flexible telescope (a colonoscopy).

Other tests may be carried out, usually after the barium X-ray has been done.

## How is it treated?

If we think you lack iron because of your diet, we will provide you with information about nutrition or arrange for you to see the hospital dietitian. If another cause of your iron deficiency has been found, we will try to treat the cause and give you tablets or liquids to replace the iron you have lost. Occasionally a blood transfusion may be necessary.

You can find more information about iron deficiency anaemia on the website: [www.patient.co.uk](http://www.patient.co.uk)

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(Written by a consultant geriatrician and checked by volunteer readers)

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