

Iron Deficiency Anemia in Pregnancy

What is iron deficiency anemia?

Hemoglobin is the part of the blood that carries oxygen. When there is not enough iron stored up in your body, your body doesn't make enough hemoglobin and you become anemic. This means that there is a lower proportion of red blood cells to whole blood than is ideal. Being anemic makes it more difficult for your body to carry oxygen to you and your baby. It is normal to become somewhat anemic during pregnancy because your blood volume increases by up to 50%, and it can take a few weeks for your body to produce enough red blood cells to keep up with this blood volume expansion. Sometimes if you don't eat enough iron-rich foods or take supplements, your body won't have enough iron to keep up with your blood supply and you can become severely anemic.

Why do we worry about anemia?

Anemia of any type means that mom and baby aren't getting the optimal amount of oxygen. This can lead to complications for the baby like growth retardation. It can also lead to complications for the mother, like fatigue during labor, postpartum hemorrhage, slow postpartum recovery, increased susceptibility to infection or trouble establishing a milk supply. Also, most women with anemia just don't feel good, and we want you to feel your best during your pregnancy.

Symptoms of iron deficiency anemia include:

- Fatigue, always wanting to sleep, too tired to do anything.
- Pale color. You may notice this especially in your lips.
- Feeling depressed.
- Having odd cravings, especially for ice.
- Shortness of breath.
- Dizziness.

How is iron deficiency anemia diagnosed?

At several points during your pregnancy, we will ask your permission to take blood samples. These samples will be analyzed for the size, shape and volume of your red blood cells, the amount of hemoglobin in your blood and the amount of iron that your body has in reserve. All of these things help create a picture of your iron levels and the health of your blood. If the lab values are low, we will want to help you increase your iron intake.

How can I prevent iron deficiency anemia?

By improving your diet, you can prevent iron deficiency anemia. Here are some suggestions:

- Cook in a cast iron skillet. Cast iron skillets are inexpensive and they can really increase your iron intake. Some researchers believe that iron deficiency anemia was not a problem for pregnant women 100 years ago because nearly everyone cooked with cast iron instead of aluminum.
- Add herbal teas to your daily routine. Herbs that are rich in iron include nettles and dandelion leaf. If you don't like the taste of these herbs, you can add mint, hibiscus or

rosehips to change the flavor. Both of these herbs are diuretics, so you should drink an extra glass of water for every cup of tea you drink.

- Increase your intake of dark leafy greens like kale, collard greens, Swiss chard and spinach. The iron in these foods is more available to your body if you cook them lightly. Dark leafy greens have lots of vitamins in them and are all around good for you! (And organic leafy greens are especially nutrient-loaded!)
- Other food sources of iron include: iron-fortified cereals, beets, black cherry concentrate, black strap molasses, beans, soy products, prune juice, dried fruit, strawberries, watermelon, pumpkin and sesame seeds and Brewer's yeast. If you are a meat-eater, you can get iron from red meat, chicken and fish.
- Eat foods rich in Vitamin C along with your iron-rich foods. Vitamin C helps your body absorb iron.
- Tincture of yellow dock also helps you absorb iron. You can take a tincture full of yellow dock with every iron rich meal or with your supplements.
- Calcium blocks iron absorption. Don't eat calcium-rich foods, like dairy products or fortified orange juice, or take calcium supplements when eating iron-rich foods or taking iron supplements. This may include your prenatal vitamins, as they often include calcium. This also means that prenatal vitamins are not a good source of iron.
- Carbonated and/or caffeinated drinks also block iron absorption. Don't drink black tea, coffee, soda or carbonated juice/water with your iron supplements or with iron-rich foods.

What if I already have iron deficiency anemia?

If you already have iron deficiency anemia or you are worried that you won't be able to prevent anemia by changing your diet, you can take supplements. It is a good idea to make changes to your diet while you are taking the supplements. You might be able to stop taking supplements once your anemia has gone away if you can increase your dietary intake of iron. Here are a few hints for getting the most out of your supplements:

- Ideally, any supplement should be taken one hour before or two hours after a meal, with Vitamin C-rich juice or with water. If you find that your supplements make you feel sick, you can try taking them with a meal.
- Work up to the recommended dosage over the period of a couple of weeks. Any sudden increase in iron may make you feel sick or constipated. Give your body a chance to adjust.
- If you can afford to, try herbal supplements first. They are gentler on your system and less likely to cause nausea or constipation. Liquid, plant-based supplements like Nature's Way Herbal Iron or Floradix are easy to absorb.
- If you are shopping for supplements, look at the ingredient list on the back of the bottle. "Ferrous" irons are more easily absorbed than "ferric" irons. Ferrous fumarate is best.
- If you can remember to take them, try the kind of supplements that have to be taken 3-4 times a day. These supplements are food-based and more easily absorbed by your body.
- If it's easier for you to take a once-a-day pill, be aware that they may cause you to feel sick. Don't take them on an entirely empty stomach (i.e. right when you wake up). Also, make sure to drink lots of water, eat lots of laxative foods like prunes and get regular exercise so that you don't become constipated.
- Don't let cost get in the way of your health! Your midwife or primary care doctor can often get you a prescription for iron supplements if you need it.