

# Information Handout

Provided by the National Anemia Action Council, Inc., a nonprofit corporation.



## Iron Deficiency Anemia

### What is anemia?

Anemia is a below-normal level of hemoglobin\* or hematocrit\*. Hemoglobin is the protein in red blood cells that carries oxygen to all parts of the body. Anemia can be a temporary condition, a consequence of other health conditions, or it can be a chronic problem. People with mild anemia may not have any symptoms or may have only mild symptoms. People with severe anemia may have problems carrying out routine activities and can feel tired or experience shortness of breath with activity.<sup>1</sup>

### How common is iron deficiency anemia?

Anemia due to iron deficiency is the most common type of anemia. In the United States, 7% of toddlers ages 1 to 2 years old and 9-16% of menstruating women are iron deficient.<sup>2,3</sup> In the poorest countries in the world, 30-70% of the people have iron deficiency anemia.<sup>4</sup>

### What causes iron deficiency anemia?

Anemia may develop if your body is low in iron. Iron deficiency can be caused by a low-iron diet, not enough iron being absorbed by your body, or bleeding from the digestive tract.<sup>2</sup> Iron is an essential part of hemoglobin and without enough hemoglobin, your body will not get the right amount of oxygen. Iron deficiency anemia is also caused by growth spurts in infants and teenagers, or heavy bleeding with normal menstruation. Pregnant women often develop anemia because the growing fetus uses some of the mother's iron.

### What are the effects of untreated iron deficiency anemia?

Fatigue and other symptoms associated with anemia can interfere with your daily activities. Studies show that children with iron deficiency anemia have below-average height and weight. They can also have behavior and learning problems resulting in poor school performance. Iron deficiency anemia in pregnancy raises the chance of a premature delivery and an underweight baby.<sup>4,6</sup>

### How do I know if I have anemia?

The best way to determine if you have anemia is to discuss your blood counts and changes in hemoglobin and hematocrit with your doctor. Symptoms usually develop when anemia is moderate to severe, and can include fatigue, weakness, pale skin, chest pain, dizziness, irritability, numbness or coldness in your hands and feet, trouble breathing, a fast heartbeat, and headache. It is important to see your doctor on a regular basis in order to be tested for possible anemia.

### What treatments are available to help me?

Sometimes iron deficiency anemia can be corrected by eating more iron-rich foods, such as meat, eggs, fish, poultry, green-leafy vegetables, and dried fruits. If your iron level is too low to be treated by increasing the intake of iron-rich foods, your doctor may recommend iron pills. Close communication with your doctor will help him or her provide the treatment that is best for you based on what is causing the anemia.

### Glossary

**Hematocrit:** Percentage of red blood cells in a blood sample

**Hemoglobin:** Protein carried by red blood cells that transports and delivers oxygen throughout your body

**Iron metabolism:** Body's process of handling iron

**Nutritional deficiency:** Lack or shortage of a necessary vitamin, mineral, or element

### References

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4. Ramakrishnan U, Yip R. J Nutr. 2002;132(suppl 4):820S-824S.
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\*Normal Lab Values: Normal hemoglobin >12 g/dL for women, >13 g/dL for men; normal hematocrit >36% for women, >39% for men.

# Iron Deficiency Anemia ...Continued

## **NAAC's Online Resources for Patients & Consumers ([www.anemia.org](http://www.anemia.org))**

**Information Handouts** – Educational handouts describing anemia caused by different conditions including: aging, cancer, diabetes, vitamin deficiency, chronic kidney disease and more; free print or download access

**Frequently Asked Questions** – Answers to patients' common questions regarding anemia

**Anemia Glossary** – Definitions for medical terms relating to anemia which are used in NAAC's educational material

**Feature Articles** – Short articles covering anemia-related topics for patients, caregivers and allied healthcare providers

**Anemia Watch** – Our free quarterly e-newsletter covering current anemia-related topics and news

**Anemia Symptoms Quiz** – Printable questionnaire to fill out and take to a physician

## **Information Handout Disclaimer**

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