

Do you have Iron Deficient Anemia?

Do you ever just have this overwhelming feeling all day, every day, that you have no energy?! Ever just sat there thinking, I eat well and healthily, I exercise, I take all my supplements, I get enough restful sleep but yet I just feel so lethargic and out of breath all the time?! Well it's maybe time it's time to have your iron levels tested, you may be suffering from iron deficient anemia.

This form of anemia is one of the most prevalent types experienced by people. This type of anemia occurs when our bodies lack iron which plays important role in haemoglobin production. Haemoglobin is a vital component of red blood cells, and this allows them the ability to carry oxygen. If our ability to carry oxygen and the amount of oxygen is compromised, this will negatively affect our lives, even in the smallest ways.

Iron deficient anemia can affect anyone, but there certain risk factors which increase your chances of suffering from this condition. The following groups of people are more likely to develop the conditions:

- - Sorry ladies but generally you are at a greater risk of developing iron deficiency anemia. The main contributor of this, is the blood loss during menstruation (though severity of menstrual flow will also determine the severity of the iron deficiency) also increase their chances.
- Vegetarians/Vegans.
 - This only happens because the consumption of certain meats high in iron are avoided, but this can definitely be made up with other food groups and if the correct quantities are eaten.
- Frequent blood donors.
 - People who routinely donate blood may have an increased risk of iron deficiency anemia since blood donation can deplete iron stores. Low hemoglobin related to blood donation may be a temporary problem remedied by eating more iron-rich foods.

Causes

We've discussed the factors that make you more prone to developing iron deficient anemia, but what would lead you to suffering from the condition. Risk factors are there, to say whose more susceptible to something, while a cause, explains what will give you that disorder.



There are numerous cause of iron deficiency, we will discuss each separately below:

- Blood loss.
 - Women with heavy periods because they lose blood during menstruation. Slow, chronic blood loss within the body from a peptic ulcer, a hiatal hernia, a colon polyp or colorectal cancer.
- A lack of iron in your diet.
 - If you consume too little iron, over time your body can become iron deficient.
- An inability to absorb iron.
 - Certain intestinal disorders can cause a malabsorption disorder iron, these include: celiac disease, crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis.
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 - They will experience an increase in blood volume as well as be a source of hemoglobin for the growing fetus, so without correct iron supplementation, they may become deficient.

Symptoms

This of your body irons as a warehouse, full of boxes containing iron. At first, when a few boxes go missing, you barely notice the change. Then when these few missing boxes start adding up, then you start to notice the change and realise.... Oops, something is definitely wrong here. The same happens at the beginning of iron deficient anemia, you will barely notice any change in yourself, then as the iron stores become more depleted... bam, it hits you and these symptoms listed below will only intensify if left untreated.

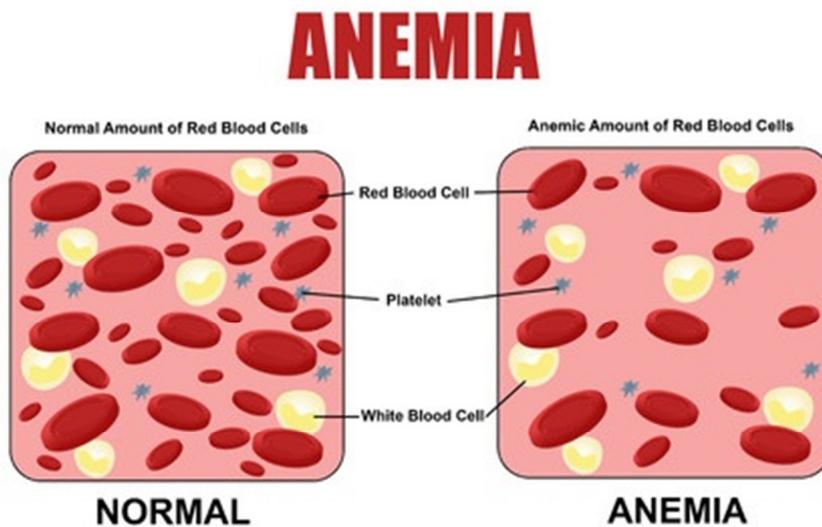
- Extreme fatigue
- Weakness
- Pale skin
- Chest pain
- Fast heartbeat
- Shortness of breath
- Headache
- Dizziness
- Light-headedness
- Cold hands and feet
- Inflammation or soreness of your tongue
- Brittle nails
- Unusual cravings for non-nutritive substances, such as ice, dirt or starch also known as pica



Diagnosis

The diagnosis of iron deficient anemia, is rather routine and initially requires a few blood tests. A haemoglobin finger prick test may also be done in the doctors consultation room as indicator for further testing. The following blood tests may be done:

- Red blood cell size and color because red blood cells are smaller and paler in colour when compared to normal red blood cells.
- Hematocrit, this refers to the percentage blood volume made up by red blood cells.
- Ferritin, a protein which is known to help store iron, and a low level is a good indicator for low levels of stored iron.



Treatment

Over-the-counter iron supplements are generally recommended to replenish iron stores, however, rather spend a bit more and get reputable brand. The amount of iron per serving is also something to be aware of, as depending on the severity of your deficiency, a certain dosage may be required, but your doctor will guide you on which is best for you specifically.

To improve the chances that your body will absorb the iron in the tablets, you may be instructed to:





- **Take iron tablets on an empty stomach.**
- **Don't take iron with antacids. Medications that immediately relieve heartburn symptoms can interfere with the absorption of iron.**
- **Take iron tablets with vitamin C as it improves the absorption of iron.**

There are unfortunately a few side-effects from iron supplements. The two most common ones experienced and which are harmless include:

- Constipation
- Blackening of stools

The benefits of iron supplementation won't be over-night, it does take some time to build up the iron stores again, but an improvement will be noticed after a week or so, yet again depending on how severe the depletion was at the begin.

However, if your iron level doesn't increase after some time following the above-mentioned treatment. There may be an underlying cause which needs to be investigated. The causes are mainly a chronic or heavy bleeding or an iron malabsorption disorder. Based on the results obtained from further investigation, the following treatment options are available:

- Antibiotics and other medications to treat peptic ulcers
- Surgery to remove a bleeding polyp, a tumor or a fibroid
- If iron deficiency anemia is severe, you may need iron given intravenously or you may need blood transfusions to help replace iron and hemoglobin quickly.

Complications

Mild iron deficiency anemia usually doesn't cause complications. However, left untreated, iron deficiency anemia can become severe and lead to health problems, including the following:

- Heart problems. Iron deficiency anemia may lead to a rapid or irregular heartbeat. Your heart must pump more blood to compensate for the lack of oxygen carried in your blood when you're anemic. This can lead to an enlarged heart or heart failure.
- Problems during pregnancy. In pregnant women, severe iron deficiency anemia has been linked to premature births and low birth weight babies. But the condition is preventable in pregnant women who receive iron supplements as part of their prenatal care.
- Iron deficiency anemia is associated with an increased susceptibility to infections.





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Prevention

The risk of developing iron deficient anemia can be reduced by incorporating iron-rich foods into your diet on a regular basis.

Foods rich in iron include:

- Red meat, pork and poultry
- Seafood
- Beans
- Dark green leafy vegetables, such as spinach
- Dried fruit, such as raisins and apricots
- Iron-fortified cereals, breads and pastas
- Peas

Your body absorbs more iron from meat than it does from other sources. If you choose to not eat meat, you may need to increase your intake of iron-rich, plant-based foods to absorb the same amount of iron as does someone who eats meat.

As mentioned earlier, vitamin C increase the absorption of iron, so by adding food high in vitamin C, you increase iron absorption.

Vitamin C is also found in:

- Broccoli
- Grapefruit
- Kiwi
- Leafy greens
- Melons
- Oranges
- Peppers
- Strawberries
- Tangerines
- Tomatoes



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Prognosis

You definitely know it's good news when the prognosis or outlook is one line. With the correct treatment of iron deficient anemia, the outcome is very favourable. However, you should us doctors by now, we love the word however! The prognosis is dependent on the root cause of the condition.

Now that you are extremely familiar with iron deficient anemia, you may ask, why is this on a blog about mountaineering and high altitudes?! Well, let me explain in summary, in the previous blogs, we've discussed effects of high altitude on your body and the bodies response to these stressors. As we know, the high you, the more "thin" the air becomes, resulting in poor oxygen saturation and thus, your body produces more red bloods and increases cardiac output. While in a person without iron deficient anemia, they are able to cope and make the adjustment by dipping into their iron reserves, but for someone lacking iron, it's not possible to use iron reserves and produce normal functioning red blood cells. The end result would be an extreme exacerbation of all iron deficiency symptoms along with a far higher risk of developing any form altitude sickness.



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