

# Iron Deficiency Anemia

Your iron results came back low – what must you do now

The following describes the most common type of anemia and what you need to know to get you back on track. If you have any questions and or need of any advice, speak to our experienced Pharmacist about this topic.

## What is iron deficiency anemia?

Anemia means low hemoglobin level. Iron deficient anemia occurs when there is a lower than normal iron stores in the body resulting in lower hemoglobin level. Iron is an essential mineral in the body as it is a building block for hemoglobin and red blood cells – an oxygen-carrying cell in your body; and a component of myoglobin – an oxygen storage protein in your muscles. The deficiency may be caused by decreased iron intake (diet, alcoholism), decreased absorption (gastrointestinal malabsorption, kidney problems), increased requirement (pregnancy, lactation, growth spurts) or increased loss (bleeding).<sup>1</sup>

## How is iron deficiency anemia diagnosed?

A physical examination is performed, followed by a review of your medical history and symptoms. A blood sample is withdrawn to look at your Hematology profile (CBC) and Ferritin level. Other blood values may be investigated if needed, but a ↓Ferritin is typically indicative of a pending or current iron deficiency anemia. There are other forms of anemia, although less common and only investigated if risk factors are present.

## What are Signs and Symptoms of Iron-Deficiency Anemia?

A person who is iron deficient may have various symptoms depending on the severity:<sup>1</sup>



- Weakness/Fatigue
- Irritability
- Headaches
- Difficulty concentrating
- Paleness
- Hair loss



## How do I increase iron levels in my body?

Iron can be obtained from food and supplements. Iron supplements are available in different formulations with varying characteristics and amounts of elemental iron. Taking Vitamin C along with iron intake will help improve iron absorption.

It is important to speak to your Pharmacist to find the appropriate supplements for your condition.<sup>1,2</sup>

## How long does it take for the iron to increase?

In 2-4 weeks, there will be a slight increase in your Hemoglobin, but it may take up to 2-4 months for anemia to be corrected, depending on the severity. The recommended follow-up is in

3 months after starting supplementation. You may need to continue your iron therapy for an additional 4-6 months after your Hemoglobin normalizes to replenish iron stores.<sup>1</sup>

## How can I introduce more iron in my diet?



Iron in food is present in two forms: heme and non-heme.

**Heme iron** is the best form of iron as they are readily absorbed. They are found in animal foods containing

hemoglobin such as meat, fish, poultry and liver such as:

- Beef, pork, chicken, veal
- Fish such as halibut, haddock, perch, salmon or tuna
- Shellfish such as clams, oysters and mussels

**Non-heme iron** primarily comes from plant sources which are present in grains, vegetables and fortified foods or supplements. In terms of its bioavailability, non-heme iron is absorbed much less efficiently than heme iron but may be increased with Vitamin C-rich foods.



Good sources of non-heme iron include:

- Fortified cereals, rice, wheat and oats
- Dark green leafy vegetables – spinach and kale
- Dried fruits – raisins and apricots
- Beans – lentils and soybeans

## Bottomline & Tips to Get Enough Iron

Iron is a vital mineral for the proper functioning of the body. The tips below can help you maximize your iron intake:

- Introduce a variety of foods containing heme and non-heme iron sources in your diet. If you don't eat meat and fish, include plenty of iron-rich plant foods in your diet.
- Consume Vitamin C-rich foods (fruit and vegetable juices) or supplements along with your iron intake to increase absorption.
- Avoid coffee, tea or milk near meals as they decrease iron absorption from food.
- And speak to our Pharmacist to find the appropriate iron supplement or other supplements for you.

### Sources:

1. BCGuidelines.ca (2019). Iron Deficiency – Diagnosis and Management - Province of British Columbia. [online] Available at: <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/health/practitioner-professional-resources/bc-guidelines/iron-deficiency#additional-tests> [Accessed 16 Sep. 2019].
2. HealthLink BC (2016). Iron in Foods. [online] Available at: <https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthlinkbc-files/iron-foods> [Accessed 16 Sep. 2019].