

Information for patients, family and visitors

A General Guide to Iron Deficiency

Why iron is needed

The body needs iron to stay healthy. It helps the immune system, brain, muscles, and energy levels. Iron is also needed to make red blood cells that carry oxygen around the body.

Iron comes from food and is stored in the body. A small amount of iron is lost from the body every day.

Iron deficiency (ID)

Iron deficiency happens when the body does not get enough iron. This can happen when not enough foods rich in iron are eaten. Even with a good diet, the body might not absorb iron well, or more iron may be lost than is taken in.

Children, teenagers and women of childbearing age are more likely to have low iron, but it is also found in people with some medical problems.

In older people, low iron may be a sign of hidden bleeding, often from the stomach or bowel, and could mean there is another medical problem.

Iron deficiency anaemia (IDA)

If low iron levels are not treated, the body will use up all its stored iron over time. This will lead to iron deficiency anaemia (IDA).

This is a serious problem as it means you do not have enough iron to make new red blood cells. If not treated, iron deficiency anaemia can be life threatening.

Signs of low iron

Symptoms can start off mild but can get worse if not treated. These include:

- feeling weak, tired, and have low energy
- feeling short of breath, dizzy, or abnormal heartbeat
- not being able to exercise as much
- losing interest in sex
- getting sick more often
- finding it hard to remember things or to concentrate
- not doing as well at work or at school
- feeling cranky or behaviour problems in children.

Finding out about iron problems

A blood test can check for low iron. Talk to your doctor or healthcare team about your health, diet, and medications. This can also happen in hospital or before surgery, or at a medical clinic.

If your iron is low, it is important to find out why. You might need more tests or see a specialist.



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How to improve iron levels

The treatment for low iron depends on how low the levels are, and what has caused it. If iron levels are low, a doctor will guide how often to check them.

Getting the right amount is important – too little can upset body functions, and too much can cause other health problems.

Iron in food

There are two types of iron in food:

- **Haem iron** found in animal products, such as red meat, chicken, pork and fish.
- **Non-haem iron** found in plant-based foods, like green leafy vegetables, nuts and whole grain cereals.

The body absorbs haem iron better than non-haem iron. Eating foods rich in vitamin C, such as citrus fruits, berries, tomatoes and broccoli, can help the body to get more iron from food.

If iron is low, food may not be enough on its own. Iron supplements come in tablets, capsules or liquid form.

It is important to get advice, as some brands may not have enough iron to fix low levels.

It is normal for iron tablets to make a person's poo darker or greenish black. Some people get an upset stomach at first, but this will usually get better over time. If not talk to your doctor about trying a different type of iron.

Intravenous (IV) iron

If iron is very low or needs to be increased quickly, a doctor may suggest IV iron, given through a vein in a hospital, outpatient clinic or medical centre.

There are different types of IV iron. Some take 5 to 20 minutes, and others a few hours. Normal activities can start soon after treatment. If oral iron was used before, it may no longer be needed.

IV iron can have side effects. The most common ones are mild and can happen up to 3 days after treatment, like nausea, headaches, dizziness, or skin reactions. Rarely, allergic reactions can happen and may be serious.

Patients are watched closely during IV iron treatment. There is a small risk of permanent skin staining if iron leaks around the IV site. Any discomfort, burning, redness, or swelling at the IV site during treatment, needs to be reported to the doctor or nurse straight away.

Before going home, you will get information on what to watch for.

More information

- [Gastroenterological Society Australia \(GESA\)](#)
- [Australian Red Cross Lifeblood](#)

[Blood Watch](#) supports safe blood management in NSW, by identifying and addressing risks related to transfusion practice, Patient Blood Management and the supply of blood and blood products. This information has been produced in collaboration with Blood Watch Network and consumer partners.

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