

About Iron and Iron Deficiency

What does iron do?

Iron is a mineral in your body that is very important for building blood cells, carrying oxygen, enzyme functions, immune system function, detoxification, growth and development.

What happens if my iron is low/if I don't get enough iron?

When you do not have enough iron you may notice that you are tired and weak. People may tell you that you look pale or grayish and the whites of your eyes can become blue-tinted. You may also have shortness of breath, feel dizzy or lightheaded (especially when you stand up), feeling cold, headache, brittle nails and hair loss. When iron becomes too low your doctor may tell you that you have iron deficiency anemia – this happens because there is not enough iron to make blood cells normally and they become very small and pale.

If iron deficiency continues for a long time you can develop problems with infections, serious heart problems, or problems with pregnancy if you are a woman. If you have a serious injury or require surgery, it is also more dangerous if you have iron deficiency.

What are other symptoms?

Some other symptoms of iron deficiency include:

- Swollen tongue
- Loss of appetite
- Depression
- Difficulty thinking/slow thinking
- Leg cramps/Restless Leg Syndrome
- Ice eating and/or Pica (cravings for non-food items like dirt, starch, paper, etc)

Where can I get iron?

The best food sources are beef, lamb, fish/shellfish, poultry, and egg yolk. There are non-animal sources of iron including dried fruits, kidney beans, lentils, cashews, blackstrap molasses, and cashews – but it is very important to know that the iron in animal protein is MUCH better absorbed than the other sources. There are also supplements that provide iron in liquids and pills. If you have iron deficiency, your doctor will probably ask you to take supplemental iron and watch your dietary intake.

Other important things

If you have iron deficiency, it is important that you follow up with your doctor for lab tests and other recommended care. If you are taking iron, do not take it at the same time as calcium or calcium containing foods. It is beneficial to take iron supplements with a meal that contains an iron-rich food such as meat.

Malabsorptive weight loss surgery patients may need to take a higher dose of iron supplements. Consult your doctor for instruction.