

Patient education: Anemia caused by low iron (The Basics)

[Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate](#)

What is anemia?

Anemia is the term doctors and nurses use when a person has too few red blood cells. Red blood cells are the cells in your blood that carry oxygen. If you have too few red blood cells, your body might not get all the oxygen it needs.

Anemia can happen for a few reasons. A common reason is a lack of iron. This is called "iron deficiency anemia." You can have too little iron because:

- You have lost a large amount of blood – This can happen slowly over time, or all of a sudden. It is the most common cause of iron deficiency anemia.
- Your body cannot absorb enough iron from food – This can happen if you have had surgery on your stomach or intestines.
- You do not get enough iron in your food – This can be a problem in infants who drink milk without iron.

What are the symptoms of iron deficiency anemia?

Many people with iron deficiency anemia have no symptoms. People who do have symptoms might:

- Seem irritable
- Feel tired or weak, especially if they try to exercise or walk up stairs
- Have headaches
- Have chest pain or trouble breathing

Is there a test for anemia?

Yes, your doctor or nurse can test your blood for anemia. The things they most often check are the "hemoglobin level" and "hematocrit." These show up on a test called the "complete blood count" or "CBC."

How is iron deficiency anemia treated?

The first step in treatment is to find out whether your anemia is caused by blood loss. If so, your doctor or nurse will want to find out why you are bleeding.

Blood loss can be related to stomach ulcers, bowel problems, or other issues. In women, blood loss can be related to heavy periods.

Whatever the cause of your anemia, your doctor or nurse can treat it by giving you iron. If the anemia is severe, you might need a blood transfusion. You might also need treatment for the cause of the bleeding.

People with iron deficiency anemia need to get iron. Eating foods with iron will not do enough to cure the anemia. You can get extra iron in pills or through a thin tube that goes into a vein, called an "IV." Most people get it in pills. Your doctor or nurse will tell you how much to take, and for how long.

Iron pills can cause side effects such as upset stomach and constipation (too few bowel movements). If you have side effects, ask your doctor or nurse what to do. They can suggest ways to reduce these side effects, or switch you to IV iron.

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