

HEALTH TOPICS

Anemia, Iron Deficiency

Overview

- Iron is an essential “building block” used by the body to synthesize hemoglobin and red blood cells. If iron levels in the body are low, the result is anemia.
- Low levels of iron in the body can be associated with lack of iron in the diet, excess loss of iron from the body (i.e. traumatic blood loss, heavy menstrual periods, bleeding ulcers), pregnancy, and poor absorption of iron from the diet (rare).
- There are other types of anemia that are not related to low iron, so accurate diagnosis is important.

Signs & Symptoms

- Often, mild iron deficiency anemia has no symptoms.
- More severe iron deficiency anemia can cause fatigue, weakness, and pale colored skin or mucous membranes.

Prevention

- Awareness of your own risk factors for developing iron deficiency anemia can help you focus on improving iron intake in your diet and being screened appropriately for anemia.
- Good dietary sources of iron include beef, fish, chicken, liver and eggs. Vegetarian sources for iron include soybeans, peanut butter, raisins, oatmeal, greens/spinach, lentils, molasses and iron fortified cereals.
- Frequent use of aspirin, Advil or Aleve may cause anemia by increasing the risk of losing blood and iron through the intestines.
- People with very heavy menstrual periods should see a clinician for evaluation and discussion of ways to reduce the heavy menstrual flow.

Treatment

- Treatment depends on accurate diagnosis.
- Various forms of iron supplements are available over the counter including ferrous sulfate, ferrous gluconate or chelated iron. Talk to your clinician about which type would be best for you.
- Iron is better absorbed if you take it with orange juice and it is best to avoid using dairy products at the same time you take your iron.
- Side effects can include stomach upset and constipation so you need to find a supplement that you can tolerate.
- People with heavy periods reduce the risk of iron deficiency by using a hormonal contraceptive method.

There are some types of anemia that are not caused by low iron levels. It is important that the type of anemia is correctly diagnosed. Increasing the iron in diet or taking vitamin pills won't help if the anemia is not due to low iron.

How We Can Help

- If you would like to be seen by our medical staff, you can book an appointment [online](#) or by calling our Appointment Desk to [schedule an appointment](#).
- Also, our [Advice Nurse](#) service is free for all UCSB students to discuss health concerns and the options for medical care.
- [Over the counter \(OTC\) products](#) to treat anemia are available for purchase at our Pharmacy, which is located in the lobby of UCSB Student Health Service

Recommended Resources

- Anemia (WebMD) <http://www.webmd.com/a-to-z-guides/understanding-anemia-basics>
- Anemia (Mayo Clinic) <http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/anemia/basics/definition/con-20026209>
- Anemia (Up-to Date) <http://www.uptodate.com/contents/anemia-caused-by-low-iron-beyond-the-basics>