



Preventing Iron Deficiency Anemia During Pregnancy

What is anemia?

Anemia occurs when you do not have enough red blood cells or enough hemoglobin in your blood. Red blood cells carry oxygen from your lungs to all the cells in your body. Hemoglobin, which is the part of red blood cells that carries oxygen, is made from iron. You get iron from foods you eat or from taking extra iron, which can come in pills or a liquid. Not getting enough iron is the most common cause of anemia during pregnancy.

Why is getting enough iron in pregnancy important?

During pregnancy, your body needs to make more blood. The extra blood helps provide your placenta with everything your baby needs to grow. Your body needs iron to make this extra blood. Your body also needs to have enough iron for your baby's needs. Your baby takes some of the iron that is in your body to make her or his blood. The iron you get from eating foods is absorbed into your body in very small amounts so it can be hard to get enough iron for both you and your baby when you are pregnant. You may need more iron than is normally in the foods you eat.

Why is preventing anemia during pregnancy important?

Women who have mild anemia will have a low amount of hemoglobin on a blood test but do not usually have symptoms. Mild anemia does not cause problems for a pregnant woman or her baby. Severe anemia can cause symptoms such as tiredness, dizziness, or fainting. Women with severe anemia are more likely to have preterm birth (the baby is born before the due date) and heavy bleeding during birth. It can also take them longer to recover after they give birth. In addition, their baby may have anemia after birth.

How do I get enough iron?

The best food sources of iron are meat, chicken, fish, eggs, dried beans, and fortified grains such as bread, cornmeal, flour, pasta, and rice. There is much less iron in green vegetables. Foods that are high in iron are listed on the next page of this handout. For most healthy women, 27 mg of ferrous iron daily is enough. Many prenatal vitamins contain this amount of iron. If you smoke or weigh more than is healthy, you may need more iron than the usual amount. If your blood test shows that you have anemia, an additional iron pill may be prescribed.

What kinds of iron can I take?

The 3 most common types of iron pills are ferrous sulfate (Feosol), iron fumarate (Feostat), and iron gluconate (Fergon). Iron sulfate and iron fumarate have 60 milligrams of elemental iron in each pill and iron gluconate has 35 mg of iron. All 3 of these iron pills work equally well.

Iron can also be taken as a liquid or as a pill that slowly releases the iron after the pill is passed through your stomach. Liquid forms of iron can cause staining to your teeth or cause bowel movements to become black. Iron that is made as a slow-release pill causes less nausea, but these pills do not work as well because not as much iron gets absorbed into your body.

What are the side effects of taking iron in pregnancy?

Iron pills can cause mild stomach upset, nausea, diarrhea, or constipation. Taking your iron pill or prenatal vitamin with iron at night or with food can help avoid stomach upset. Drinking plenty of water and eating foods with lots of fiber can help prevent constipation.



What can help my body absorb iron?

Eating foods that have a lot of vitamin C can help your body absorb iron better. Foods with lots of vitamin C include orange juice, grapefruit juice, strawberries, pineapple, kale, broccoli, tomatoes, and peppers. You may take an iron pill every day, but your body can also absorb the iron very well if you take the iron every other day. Taking the iron pill every other day also causes less stomach upset.

What can keep my body from absorbing iron?

Foods that have a lot of calcium can keep your body from absorbing iron well. Milk, yogurt, cheese, and other dairy products have lots of calcium, so it is best not to take an iron pill at the same time as you are eating these foods. Coffee and tea can also make it harder for your body to absorb the iron. Iron also does not get absorbed well if you are taking antacids for heartburn, such as Tums. It is best to take iron 2 hours before or after taking any other medicine.

What foods are high in iron?

The foods at the top of this list have more iron, and the foods at the bottom have less iron. All of these foods are good to eat to prevent getting anemia.

Milligrams iron per serving	Food
18	Breakfast cereals, fortified with iron, 1 serving
5-8	Beef or chicken liver, lamb kidney, fried
	Oysters, cooked
	White beans, canned
	Oatmeal or cream of wheat, cooked
	Chocolate, dark
2-3	Beef round
	Sardines, canned in oil
	Lentils, cooked
	Lima beans, kidney beans, baked beans, soy beans, or chick peas, cooked
	Tofu or tempeh
	Spinach, boiled
	Tomatoes, canned

Adapted from the National Institutes of Health, Office of Dietary Supplements. Available from <https://ods.od.nih.gov/factsheets/Iron-HealthProfessional/>.

For More Information

Mayo Clinic: Iron Deficiency Anemia During Pregnancy

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/pregnancy-week-by-week/in-depth/anemia-during-pregnancy/art-20114455>

National Institutes of Health: Iron

<https://ods.od.nih.gov/factsheets/Iron-Consumer>

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