

## East Mississippi Endoscopic Center

### Anemia - iron deficiency

Anemia is a condition where red blood cells are not providing adequate oxygen to body tissues. There are many types and causes of anemia. Iron deficiency anemia is a decrease in the number of red cells in the blood caused by too little iron.

Iron deficiency anemia is the most common form of anemia. Approximately 20% of women, 50% of pregnant women, and 3% of men are iron deficient. Iron is an essential component of hemoglobin, the oxygen-carrying pigment in the blood. Iron is normally obtained through the food in your diet and by recycling iron from old red blood cells. Without it, the blood cannot carry oxygen effectively -- and oxygen is needed for the normal functioning of every cell in the body.

The causes of iron deficiency are too little iron in the diet, poor absorption of iron by the body, and loss of blood (including from heavy menstrual bleeding).

In men and postmenopausal women, anemia is usually caused by gastrointestinal blood loss associated with ulcers, the use of aspirin or nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory medications (NSAIDs), or certain types of cancer (esophagus, stomach, colon).

Risk factors related to blood loss are peptic ulcer disease, long term aspirin use, and colon cancer.

#### Symptoms

- Pale skin color
- Fatigue
- Irritability
- Weakness
- Shortness of breath
- Sore tongue
- Brittle nails
- Unusual food cravings (called pica)
- Decreased appetite (especially in children)
- Headache - frontal
- Blue tinge to sclerae (whites of eyes)

Note: There may be no symptoms if anemia is mild.

The cause of the deficiency must be identified, particularly in older patients who are most susceptible to intestinal cancer.

Oral iron supplements are available (ferrous sulfate). The best absorption of iron is on an empty stomach, but many people are unable to tolerate this and may need to take it with food. Milk and antacids may interfere with absorption of iron and should not be taken at the same time as iron supplements. Vitamin C can increase absorption and is essential in the production of hemoglobin.

With treatment, the outcome is likely to be good. In most cases the blood counts will return to normal in 2 months.

There are usually no complications. However, iron deficiency anemia may recur, so regular follow-up is encouraged.

Everyone's diet should include adequate amounts of iron. Red meat, liver, fish, and egg yolks, legumes (peas and beans), and raisins are important sources of iron. Flour, bread, and some cereals are fortified with iron. If you aren't getting enough iron in your diet (uncommon in the U.S.), iron supplements should be taken.