



# Anemia

**Anemia** means that red blood cells or the amount of hemoglobin in red blood cells is low. Hemoglobin is a protein that carries oxygen in red blood cells.

Common types of anemia are low amounts of iron, folic acid (a B-vitamin), and vitamin B<sub>12</sub>.

## Causes

- Anemia from low iron. Often, the cause is blood loss from menstruation in females, peptic ulcers, and other medical problems.
- Anemia from low folic-acid. The cause is lack of folic acid in the diet.
- Anemia from low vitamin B<sub>12</sub>. This usually results when the body doesn't absorb vitamin B<sub>12</sub> from food, not a lack of vitamin B<sub>12</sub> in the diet.

## Signs & Symptoms

- Tiredness.
- Weakness.
- Paleness. This could be pale skin or paleness around the gums, nailbeds, or the linings of the lower eyelids.
- Shortness of breath.
- Heart palpitations or rapid heartbeat.
- Cravings for unusual things, such as laundry starch, dirt, or ice.



*Tiredness and paleness are signs of anemia.*

When folic acid is low, extra symptoms can occur. These include: Appetite loss and weight loss; nausea and diarrhea, swollen abdomen, and a sore, red tongue that looks glazed. When vitamin B<sub>12</sub> is low, extra symptoms include: Chest pain on exertion; appetite loss and weight loss; nausea and diarrhea, a hard time concentrating, and a sore, red tongue that looks glazed. If vitamin B<sub>12</sub> is very low, nervous system problems occur. These include: Numbness and tingling of the hands and feet; walking and balance problems; memory loss, confusion, dementia, or psychosis. This is known as pernicious anemia.

## Treatment

Anemia shares symptoms with many health problems. It needs to be diagnosed by a doctor. Treatment for it depends on the type and what caused it. This includes:

- Treating the problem that caused it.
- Proper diet and vitamin and/or mineral supplements, as prescribed. **{Note: Don't take iron supplements on your own. Persons with a genetic illness called **hemochromatosis** (iron overload disease) can be harmed with iron supplements.}**
- Vitamin B<sub>12</sub> shots, if needed.

Persons with severe anemia may need one or more blood transfusions.



## Anemia, Continued

### Questions to Ask

{**Note:** See, also, **Questions to Ask in Menstrual Bleeding Problems** at [www.HealthyLearn.com](http://www.HealthyLearn.com). }

Do you feel very weak and do you have any of these problems?

- Palpitations. Fast or irregular heartbeat.
- You feel faint and breathless.
- Chest pain on exertion.
- Memory loss. Confusion.
- Dementia. Psychosis.

YES



NO

With blood in the stools or urine, black, tarlike stools, or heavy vaginal bleeding, do you feel lightheaded, weak, short of breath, and/or do you have severe abdominal pain?

YES



NO

Do you feel weak and do you have any of these problems?

- You feel dizzy with exertion or when you stand up.
- Red dots of bleeding under the skin.
- Ulcers in the mouth, throat, or rectum.
- Bruising that occurs without reason.
- Ringing in the ears.

YES



NO

Do you feel tired and weak longer than 2 weeks after using self-care measures?

YES



NO



*See Self-Care / Prevention in next column*

### Self-Care / Prevention

- Follow your doctor's treatment plan.

#### To Get and Absorb Iron

- Eat foods that are good sources of iron: Lean, red meats; green, leafy vegetables; beef liver; poultry; fish; wheat germ; oysters; dried fruit; and iron-fortified cereals.
- Eat foods high in vitamin C, such as citrus fruits, tomatoes, and strawberries. Vitamin C helps your body absorb iron from plant foods.
- Take the supplements your doctor advises.
- If you drink tea, drink it between meals. Tannins in tea block iron absorption. Or, add milk to tea. The calcium in milk binds with the tannins. (Herbal tea does not have tannins.)
- Avoid antacids, the food additive EDTA, and phosphates (found in soft drinks, beer, ice cream, etc.). These block iron absorption.

#### To Get and Absorb Folic Acid

- Eat good food sources of folate every day. Examples are asparagus, brussels sprouts, spinach, collard greens, broccoli, peas, oranges, cantaloupe, oatmeal, and whole-grain cereals.
- Eat fresh, raw fruits and vegetables often. Don't overcook food. Heat destroys folic acid.
- Take the supplement your doctor advises.
- Don't smoke. Don't drink alcohol.

#### For Getting B<sub>12</sub>

- Eat animal sources of food. Good choices are lean meats, fish, poultry, nonfat or low-fat dairy products, and cereals with added vitamin B<sub>12</sub>.
- Strict vegetarians (vegans) who eat no animal sources of food may need a vitamin B<sub>12</sub> supplement or foods fortified with it.