

by Karen Bannan



anemia

Is it the reason you're tired?

what it is

Anemia is a condition that occurs when the body doesn't produce enough hemoglobin, an iron-rich protein in red blood cells that carries oxygen throughout the body. More than 3.4 million Americans are anemic at any one time, the majority women of childbearing age. Left untreated, long-term anemia can lead to congestive heart failure or heart disease.

causes

One-third of women with anemia have the type caused by iron deficiency, the most common cause of the condition.

Women who have long menstrual periods, during which they bleed heavily for more than three to five days, are more likely to be anemic, as are long-term dieters and vegans. Anemia can also be the by-product of another condition, such as kidney disease, rheumatoid arthritis, irritable bowel syndrome, hemophilia, hemorrhoids or diabetes.

symptoms

Symptoms can be mild and are often confused with the effects of a busy lifestyle, or they can be much more severe. They include:

- Extreme fatigue, weakness and dizziness
- Rapid heartbeat, palpitations or shortness of breath
- Feeling cold
- Sadness or depression
- Cloudy mental functioning
- Looking pale

getting diagnosed

A complete blood count (CBC) is needed to determine if you're anemic. This measures the levels of red blood cells and hemoglobin, as well as white blood cells and platelet counts. On average a normal hemoglobin level should be between 12 and 18 g/dL.

prevention

Preventing anemia is difficult, especially for women who menstruate heavily. Still, diet can help keep your blood healthy. Eating foods that contain high levels of iron—the typical woman needs about 8 to 18 mg daily—is the first step (see "Treatment," left). Also, ask your doctor for a CBC right after your period, when hemoglobin levels are lowest. If menstrual blood loss is a factor, consider using a hormonal birth control method, which can make periods lighter by reducing blood loss.

treatment

If your anemia is caused by an underlying condition, your doctor will focus first on addressing that condition. If the anemia persists, medication may be used to stimulate red blood cell production to increase hemoglobin.

If your anemia is due to iron deficiency, treatment can be as simple as ingesting more iron. This means eating plenty of iron-rich foods such as liver, lean meats, dried beans, eggs, raisins, spinach and peanut butter.

If increasing iron levels through diet alone doesn't work, iron supplements may be given under the supervision of a doctor. In severe cases of iron-deficiency anemia, a blood transfusion may be needed. Restoring iron levels can take up to six months.

"Anemia is dramatically underdiagnosed because most of the time, symptoms are so common that people think they've just had a hard day."

Allen R. Nissenson, M.D.

*professor of medicine
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WANT TO KNOW MORE? Log on to the National Anemia Action Council's web site at www.anemia.org or the Anemia LifeLine at www.anemia.com.

tip

Eat a banana for a quick energy boost, plus vitamins and minerals.