

# MANAGING YOUR ANEMIA

In anemia, the body doesn't have enough red blood cells (RBCs) or hemoglobin to meet its needs.



RBCs

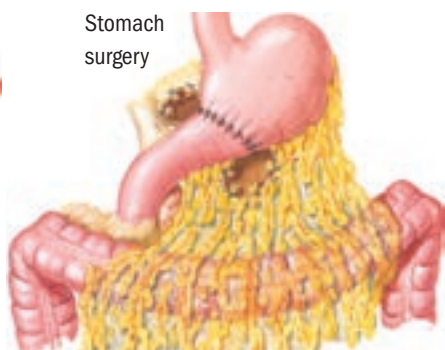


Lack of iron, folate, and vitamin B<sub>12</sub>, which can result from poor diet or bleeding, are causes.

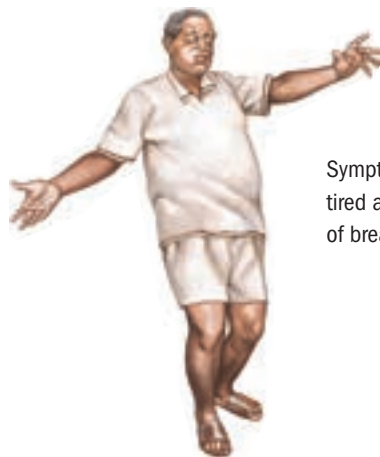


Bleeding

Stomach surgery



Others are surgery and autoimmune, hereditary, and chronic diseases.



Symptoms include feeling tired and dizzy, shortness of breath.



Your health care provider uses a medical history, physical examination, and blood tests for diagnosis.

## What Is Anemia?

Anemia means low blood. People with anemia don't have enough red blood cells (RBCs) or hemoglobin. RBCs take oxygen to organs and tissues. Hemoglobin is the red pigment in RBCs that carries the oxygen to the cells. Iron-deficiency anemia, pernicious anemia, and anemia of chronic disease are common types.

## What Causes Anemia?

Common causes include a lack of iron, folate, and vitamin B<sub>12</sub> (cobalamin), which can result from poor diet, poor absorption from the intestines, autoimmune diseases and hereditary diseases (e.g., sickle cell anemia) that can cause destruction of RBCs or blood loss from bleeding. Blood can be lost from bleeding stomach ulcers, gastritis, colon cancer, and heavy periods. In autoimmune diseases, the body attacks its own RBCs and destroys them. Elderly people and people with alcoholism can have folate deficiency, which is mainly caused by poor diet. Any chronic disease lasting more than 1 or 2 months can also cause anemia.

## What Are the Symptoms of Anemia?

Common symptoms include tiredness and shortness of breath. How severe the symptoms are depends on how bad the anemia is and if it is of sudden onset such as with acute blood loss. Long-lasting iron deficiency can cause other symptoms such as sore mouth, swallowing problems, or nails that soften and curl. Severe vitamin B<sub>12</sub> deficiency can affect memory and cause problems with balance.

## How Is Anemia Diagnosed?

The health care provider makes a diagnosis from a medical history, physical examination, and blood tests. A specialist (hematologist) may be involved if causes aren't clear. In some cases, a test known as a bone marrow exam may be done to determine the cause of the anemia.

Iron, vitamin B<sub>12</sub>, and folate are given for treatment of iron deficiency and vitamin B<sub>12</sub> or folic acid deficiency. For anemia of chronic disease, therapy means controlling the disease or using erythropoietin injections. Severe anemia may need blood transfusions.



Follow a nonstrenuous exercise program. Don't abuse alcohol.



Eat a good diet with foods high in iron, vitamin B<sub>12</sub>, and folate. Iron-rich foods include meat, milk, and eggs and certain vegetables. Vegetarians may need vitamin supplements.



Call your health care provider if you have severe tiredness, palpitations, chest pain, or shortness of breath.

## How Is Anemia Treated?

Treatment depends on the cause and severity of disease. Blood transfusions may be needed for severe anemia. For iron deficiency anemia, the health care provider may prescribe iron tablets. For pernicious anemia, vitamin B<sub>12</sub> injections are given, usually for life. People with vitamin B<sub>12</sub> deficiency caused by poor diet can take vitamin tablets. Treatment of folate deficiency is folate pills. The main treatment of anemia of chronic disease is control of underlying disease. Erythropoietin, given as injections, may be used in severe anemia in renal failure and in cancer.

## DOs and DON'Ts in Managing Anemia:

- ✓ **DO** follow your health care provider's recommendations for controlling underlying conditions that may be causing anemia.
- ✓ **DO** talk with your health care provider about new medicines and their effects on anemia.
- ✓ **DO** eat a well-balanced diet rich in iron, vitamin B<sub>12</sub>, and folate.
- ✓ **DO** follow a nonstrenuous exercise program.
- ✓ **DO** use medical alert identification if you have severe anemia.
- ✓ **DO** use vitamin supplements if you eat a special diet, such as a vegetarian (especially vegan).
- ✓ **DO** call your health care provider if you have symptoms of severe anemia, such as shortness of breath.
- ✓ **DO** tell your health care provider if you're pregnant planning a pregnancy, or breast-feeding.
- ✓ **DO** tell your health care provider about stomach upset or constipation from an iron supplement. These side effects usually get better with a lower dose or change to a different iron pill.
- ⊘ **DON'T** stop taking your medicine or change your dosage because you feel better unless your health care provider tells you to.
- ⊘ **DON'T** drink alcohol in excess.

## FROM THE DESK OF

## NOTES

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

### Contact the following sources:

- National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute Information Center  
Tel: (301) 251-1222
- The American Society of Hematology  
Tel: (202) 776-0544