



Anemia—What is it?

A lower than normal number of red blood cells (RBCs) in the blood or a below normal hemoglobin (HEE-muh-glow-bin) is called anemia. Hemoglobin is a protein in the red blood cells that gives the red color to the blood. It also transports oxygen from your lungs to all parts of your body. Because there are fewer red blood cells in anemia, not enough oxygen gets to the rest of the body. This can cause a person to feel very tired along with other symptoms that may get in the way of your daily activities.

Signs and Symptoms

The most common symptom of anemia is fatigue (feeling very tired or weak). Other signs of anemia are:

- Shortness of breath
- Dizziness
- Headache
- A fast or irregular heartbeat
- Chest pain
- Numbness or coldness in the hands and feet
- Pale skin
- Irritability
- Poor concentration
- Inflammation or soreness of the tongue
- Brittle nails
- Odd food cravings (called pica)
- Decreased appetite especially in children

Note: Anemia often goes undetected because the symptoms can vary from severe to extremely mild and vague.

Causes of Anemia

There can be many causes of anemia. The most common type of anemia is due to iron deficiency. This happens when there is not enough iron in your diet. A lack of certain vitamins (folic acid, vitamin B6, and vitamin B12) in the diet can also lead to a vitamin deficiency anemia. Other types of

anemia are hereditary (passed down from parents), like sickle cell disease and thalassemia or can be caused by blood loss from various medical conditions such as heavy menstrual periods, ulcers, surgery, trauma, or cancer.

How do you know that you have anemia?

See your doctor if you're feeling very tired for unexplained reasons or if you have any of the other signs of anemia (see list above for signs and symptoms). Your doctor will do a physical exam, take a detailed medical history and blood tests, including a complete blood count (CBC). A CBC measures the levels of red blood cells, called the hematocrit (hee-MAT-oh-crit), and hemoglobin in your blood.

If the CBC confirms that you have anemia, your doctor may order more tests to find out the cause, severity, and correct treatment for your condition.

Treatment

The goal of treatment is to increase the oxygen-carrying capacity of the blood. This is done by increasing the number of red blood cells and/or increasing the amount of hemoglobin as close to the normal level as

possible. It is also important to treat the underlying cause of the anemia.

The treatment will depend on the type, cause, and severity of the anemia. Treatment may include dietary supplements, changes in diet, medicine, and/or medical procedures. In severe cases of anemia, surgery or blood transfusion may be needed.

Prevention

Many kinds of anemia caused by iron and vitamin deficiency can be prevented. You can help avoid this type of anemia by eating a healthy and varied diet that includes foods rich in iron, folate and Vitamin B12. Other kinds of anemia can be prevented or from occurring again by treating the underlying cause, such as bleeding, or by changing a medicine that can cause anemia. Some forms of hereditary anemia, such as sickle cell, cannot be prevented. If you think you may have or be at risk for this type of anemia, it is important to discuss your personal and family history with your doctor and start treatment.

Please call your health care provider if you have any questions, concerns, or think you may have symptoms of anemia or unusual bleeding.



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