



HEALTH INFORMATION

Anaemia

What is Anaemia?

Anaemia is a condition where the amount of haemoglobin in the blood or the number of red blood cells is reduced to below normal levels. There are around six types of anaemia. Some causes of anaemia are more serious and it is important to find the reason for the symptoms. The treatment depends on the underlying cause. For many people, this may simply be medication, vitamins or other more complex treatments. The most common cause for iron deficiency anaemia is blood loss, such as women having heavy periods, or sudden loss as a result of severe bleeding, i.e. a perforated stomach ulcer, an accident or trauma. For the majority of patients anaemia is not life threatening but rarely it can be. Assessment needs to be undertaken via the General Practitioner (GP).

Your body may not be able to produce enough red blood cells if your diet doesn't contain enough iron, vitamin B12 or folic acid. It is also harder for the body to digest vegetables than red meat, therefore vegetarians need to ensure that they have sufficient quantities of iron in their diet.

Symptoms

Anaemia can cause symptoms of tiredness, lethargy, breathlessness on exertion, dizziness, palpitations and headaches. Your doctor may examine your eyelids, which can lose their normal colour and your lips, tongue or skin, which may look pale. Some people may not have any symptoms.

Treatment

Treatments will depend on the type and cause of the anaemia. For iron deficiency anaemia, iron tablets will be given for a period of months, initially to correct the deficiency and then to replenish the body's stores. The tablets can sometimes cause side effects such as constipation or diarrhoea and darken stools. If tablets are not enough, injections may be given.

If there is a lack of the intrinsic factor vitamin B12 absorption, vitamin B12 injections will be given every 3 months. Alternatively another form of vitamin B12 can be given orally. Either way, vitamin B12 will be given for life.

If the anaemia has been caused by another illness, this cause will be treated directly.

Self-Help Measures

If the anaemia is due to a deficiency in your diet you must try to increase your intake of that element:

- Vitamin B12 is found in meat, fish, eggs and milk
- Iron is found in liver, meat, green vegetables, flour, eggs and milk
- Folic Acid is found in green vegetables (lightly cooked) especially broccoli and spinach and in liver and kidney
- Take your iron tablets with orange juice to aid absorption
- Keep your tablets away from children, iron tablets can kill children
- If you are vegetarian, try to find another source of vitamin B12 such as eggs and milk, some breakfast cereals have added B12 while soya milk and yeast extracts are also a good alternative to supplements

For more information

www.nhs.uk/conditions/iron-deficiency-anaemia/

www.pernicious-anaemia-society.org/symptom

www.nhs.uk >Health A-Z> Vitamin B12 or folate deficiency anaemia