

Understanding Anemia

Q What is anemia?

A Anemia is a health condition when your body doesn't have enough healthy red blood cells to carry oxygen to your organs.

Q Is anemia inherited or developed?

A It can be both. It depends on the type of anemia. For example, sickle cell anemia is a condition you are born with. Other types of anemia, such as iron-deficiency anemia, can develop later in life, including during pregnancy.

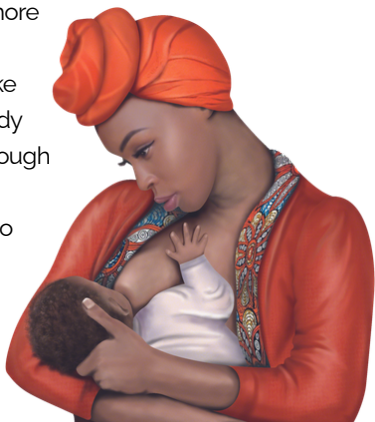
Q When can anemia typically develop if it is not inherited?

A Anemia can develop at any time, but it is more likely during certain stages of life.

- During heavy periods
- During pregnancy
- While breastfeeding
- After giving birth

Q Why does anemia happen during pregnancy?

A During pregnancy, your blood volume increases. For your body to make more blood, you need more vitamins and minerals, like iron. Sometimes your body doesn't get or absorb enough of them, so it can't make enough red blood cells to support your body.



Q Can my iron levels be good but still have anemia?

A Yes, you can have normal iron levels and still have anemia. Low iron is the most common cause of anemia, but not the only one. Symptoms of different types of anemia can be similar. A blood test can identify what causes your anemia.

Q Are there different types of anemia?

A Yes! There are different types of anemia, each with different causes. Here are some of the most common types:

- Iron-deficiency anemia (by far the most common)
- Vitamin B12 deficiency anemia
- Folate deficiency anemia

A person can have one or more types of anemia.

Signs, Risks, and Complications

Q What are the signs of anemia during pregnancy?

A

- Feeling very tired or weak even when you slept well
- Feeling dizzy or lightheaded
- Having trouble breathing
- Having cold hands and feet
- Craving non-food items (for example, ice, dirt)

Q How can anemia affect my baby?

A If anemia is not treated, there is a small chance your baby might be born too early (preterm birth, which is birth before 37 weeks) or too small. If you have anemia and you lose too much blood during childbirth, you might need a blood transfusion.

Q During pregnancy your baby will take what they need.

A Yes and no. Your baby will use some of your iron, but if your iron is low, the baby won't have access to as much as they may need to grow and develop.

Q What other pregnancy complications are linked to having anemia?

A Some complications like placenta issues, preterm birth, postpartum hemorrhage might be linked to anemia during pregnancy.

Q Can I pass iron deficiency anemia to my baby?

A This is possible. If your iron levels are low, your baby's iron levels can be low also. Your baby may also need to take iron to address their iron deficiency. Babies may not absorb iron as well as adults do, so treatment can sometimes be a bit more challenging.

Q Will my anemia go away after I give birth?

A Typically, anemia does not go away without treatment. During childbirth, you lose blood. Your body then needs to produce new blood cells to make up for what was lost. For that it needs iron. It takes time for your iron levels to return to normal. Things that can help:

- Iron-rich diet
- Taking iron pills

Q Can anemia be long-term?

A Yes, it can be. It's important to find out what may be causing longer-term anemia (for example, extra blood loss from heavy periods, not enough iron in diet, etc.).



Prevention and Treatment

Q How can I prevent anemia?

A Starting prenatal care early, getting all the recommended blood tests, and taking prenatal vitamins are key steps. You diet can also help lowering the risks of anemia and other health complications. You can increase your iron by eating more leafy greens, beans, red meat, and whole grains. Healthcare providers might also recommend extra iron supplements.

Q How is iron-deficiency anemia treated?

A Healthcare providers may tell you to eat more iron-rich foods, take iron pills, or get extra vitamins. If you or your provider feel that taking daily pills and adjusting your diet might not be the best for you, other treatments like iron IV might be right for you.

Q What is iron infusion?

A An iron infusion (intravenous iron) is a treatment where iron is delivered directly into your bloodstream using an IV. It is used to increase iron levels and treat iron-deficiency anemia, instead of oral iron pills.

Q When you are not pregnant and pregnant, eating the same amount of iron should be fine.

- When you are not pregnant, you need 18 mg of iron per day.
- When you are pregnant, you need 27 mg per day, which is the amount in many prenatal vitamins.

If you are expecting twins, your provider might recommend you more iron.

Q How does my body get iron from food?

A Your body absorbs iron in the small intestine, but it only takes in a small amount of what you eat. The absorbed iron is then released into the blood stream, and it gets delivered to and stored in your liver as a protein called ferritin. Ferritin gets released to make new red blood cells as needed.

Q Is it easier to absorb iron from certain sources than others?

A Yes. Iron from animal products is absorbed easier than from plant sources.

Q What helps iron absorption?

A Vitamin C! Vitamin C helps iron absorption and may help decrease common side effects of taking iron supplements such as constipation. Try taking iron pills with a cup of fruit or a glass of orange juice.

Q What is a cast iron skillet?

A It is a heavy pot or pan that is made of cast iron, which is a mixture of iron, carbon, and other metals. Back in the old households, almost everyone had it. Cooking in it can add small amounts of iron to your food and it makes the most delicious meals. It needs special handling.

Q If I take iron pills for anemia, will I see my levels changing before I give birth?

A The time it takes to treat anemia depends on factors like your current iron levels. Improving your blood count (hemoglobin or hematocrit level) is the goal. Sometimes the standard amount of iron is not enough, or may need to get IV (intravenous) iron.

Learn more about anemia and get more questions answered about your health during pregnancy at: blackwpc.org/anemia

FAQs

IRON-DEFICIENCY ANEMIA DURING PREGNANCY

Your Questions Answered!

This resource was co-developed with the **Anemia Community Leadership Group (ACLG)**, a PRISHSM Community Advisory Board convened by BWPC.