Iron deficiency [1]

Dear Alice,

I've just been told that I lack iron in my blood. So, I'm curious, what is the worst thing that could happen if I don't do anything about it?

Answer

Dear Reader,

While pumping iron in barbell form might help you look more like Mr. Schwarzenegger [2], pumping iron through your blood in mineral form is a critical component of your overall health. A constant supply of iron in your diet fuels the production of new red blood cells. These red blood cells contain hemoglobin, a complex protein-iron compound that carries oxygen from the lungs to all of the body's cells. If your blood levels of iron are low, you can develop iron deficiency anemia ? basically, your body isn?t able to make good use of the oxygen you?re inhaling. What might happen if you don?t take steps to address an iron deficiency? The answer is that you?d likely start to experience a number of symptoms (read on for more about those), if you haven?t started experiencing them already ? and they could get worse over time. The good news is that getting enough iron pumping through your body is typically much easier than being a professional body builder.

You mention that you?ve been told you lack iron in your blood. Did you get this news from a health care provider? If so, did s/he evaluate you for other symptoms of iron deficiency anemia? Depending on just how iron deficient you are, symptoms of iron deficiency anemia [3] can include:

- Fatigue
- Irritability
- Headaches
- Pale skin and eye lining color
- Tingling in the hands and feet
- Pica [4], or cravings for non-food substances like dirt, ice, or soap

Though a medical professional will be able to more accurately address your specific needs, you may be interested to know that the simplest fix for iron deficiency typically involves adding more iron to your diet. The form of iron found in animal foods, called heme iron, is more easily absorbed than the form from plant foods (non-heme iron). As such, good sources of iron include beef liver, clams, oysters, and other lean meats (like beef and pork). For the
vegetarians and vegans out there, beans, wheat germ, and whole grains are some plant sources of iron. If heme iron and non-heme iron are eaten together, your body will absorb more of the non-heme iron than if the non-heme iron were eaten alone. However, any iron that you can manage to fit into your diet is better than none! Eating or drinking something with vitamin C along with your food can also help your body more easily absorb iron.

As a general guideline from the National Institutes of Health [5], here are the recommended daily intakes of iron by sex and age:

- **Females, 14 to 18 years old**: 15 mg/day
- **Females, 19 to 50 years old**: 18 mg/day
- **Females, 51 years and older**: 8 mg/day
- **Males, 14 to 18 years old**: 11 mg/day
- **Males, 19 to 50 years old**: 8 mg/day
- **Males, 51 years and older**: 8 mg/day

(Note: The recommendation for females is higher than it is for males to make up for blood loss that occurs during menstruation.)

Some groups of people are more likely to be at risk of iron deficiency than others and might benefit from paying extra attention to their iron intake:

- Pregnant women (the recommended intake increases to 27 mg/day)
- Girls in their teens
- People with renal or gastrointestinal diseases
- People with cancer
- Women of childbearing age who have long and heavy periods
- Vegetarians and vegans
- Frequent blood donors
- Athletes who regularly participate in strenuous activity

If you do decide to take steps to increase your iron, keep in mind that some individuals may require supplements [6] to bring their iron levels up to the recommended levels, but this is not the answer for everyone. There are side effects of taking iron supplements, and it can be dangerous to your health if you take too much. So, teaming up with your health care provider to assess your iron levels and determine the most appropriate course of action is highly recommended.

Hope this info helps you iron out your thoughts!

Alice!

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- Nutrients [10]

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