

Women must heed the warning signs of iron deficiency

Issued by [Stone](#)

20 Mar 2023

Iron deficiency is one of the leading nutritional deficiencies globally. Proper education about iron deficiency's causes, effects and long-term impact is needed urgently. Most women may be aware of an iron deficiency but are unaware of early warning signs that could indicate a more serious underlying health concern.



Iron deficiency can lead to iron deficiency anaemia if left untreated. It is crucial for individuals to be aware of the symptoms and risk factors and to seek medical advice if they suspect they may have an iron deficiency.

Iron deficiency is prevalent in women, and it can impact them in several ways:

- **Anaemia:** Iron deficiency is the most common cause of anaemia in women. Symptoms of anaemia include fatigue, overall weakness in the body, pale skin, shortness of breath, and dizziness.
- **Pregnancy complications:** Iron deficiency during pregnancy can increase the risk of preterm delivery and low birth weight in babies.
- **Sudden blood loss or blood loss over time:** Any form of blood loss from the body will have a higher risk for iron deficiency, including gastrointestinal or heavy menstrual bleeding.
- **Decreased exercise performance:** Iron is necessary for the muscles to function correctly. Without iron, our bodies can't produce enough haemoglobin to carry oxygen throughout our bodies. So, a lack of iron can cause decreased exercise performance and endurance.

Women must get enough iron through their diet or supplements to prevent iron deficiency and its associated health problems. If you suspect you have iron deficiency, talk to your doctor, who can recommend testing and treatment options.

What is an iron deficiency?

Iron deficiency is a common condition that occurs when the body lacks iron. It is an essential mineral that the body uses to produce haemoglobin, a protein in red blood cells that carries oxygen throughout the body. When there is insufficient iron, the body cannot produce enough haemoglobin.

Our bodies store excess iron in the form of ferritin, a protein that holds iron in our bodies. When our bodies need more

iron, ferritin releases the stored iron to produce haemoglobin. A relationship exists between ferritin and haemoglobin in that ferritin plays a crucial role in regulating the body's iron levels, affecting the production of haemoglobin. If the body has sufficient iron stores, it can produce enough haemoglobin to maintain healthy oxygen levels. However, when the body is low on iron, it cannot produce enough haemoglobin, and over a prolonged time, this could lead to anaemia. Measuring haemoglobin and ferritin levels can help doctors determine if a person has iron deficiency anaemia and recommend the best treatment plan.

The level of iron deficiency that indicates anaemia varies depending on the individual. Still, generally, a diagnosis of iron deficiency anaemia is made when a person's haemoglobin level falls below normal ranges. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines anaemia as a haemoglobin level below 12 g/dL in women and below 13 g/dL in men. However, these values may vary depending on age, sex, and other factors.

Some of the most common symptoms that might indicate an iron deficiency include the following:

- Fatigue and weakness
- Pale skin and nail beds
- Shortness of breath
- Dizziness or light-headedness
- Heart palpitations
- Headaches and migraines
- Cold hands and feet
- Brittle nails
- Restless leg syndrome

Living with an iron deficiency

Medshield Medical Scheme recommends consulting a healthcare professional to help diagnose the severity of the iron deficiency and investigate if an underlying cause could be present. Funds in the Medical Savings Account (MSA) will cover an iron deficiency unless it is considered iron deficiency anaemia. In this case, it will be regarded as a Prescribed Minimum Benefit (PMB).

The management of iron deficiency depends on the severity and underlying cause of the condition. Treatment usually involves increasing iron intake through dietary changes or iron supplements in moderate to severe iron deficiency or anaemia cases. Such supplements are available in different forms, including ferrous sulphate, ferrous gluconate, and ferric citrate. In some cases, intravenous iron therapy may be necessary.

The recommended amount of iron supplementation can vary depending on the individual's age, sex, and underlying medical conditions. For mild cases of iron deficiency, dietary changes may be sufficient. High in iron foods include red meat, poultry, fish, beans, lentils, tofu, spinach, and fortified cereals. Foods that contain vitamin C can help the body absorb iron more effectively.

Overcoming an iron deficiency takes time. You must consult a healthcare professional to help you develop a plan to manage and improve your iron levels. It will not take a week, but you will notice improvements after a few weeks of starting treatment. You will have more energy, less shortness of breath, better focus, and more time to do the things you love.

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