

Are you Anemic?

by Dr. Sara Ohgushi, Naturopathic Physician

Q: I've been SO tired recently. What could be causing it?

A: There are MANY causes of fatigue, but there are at least two causes that are relatively easily diagnosed and treated and therefore should be ruled out: hypothyroidism and anemia. (I'll save hypothyroidism for another article...) Anemia is diagnosed by low red blood cells and low hemoglobin counts on blood work. What this means in a practical sense is that you do not have enough oxygen carrying capacity in your blood, so every cell in the body does not get quite as much oxygen as it would like. No wonder you feel tired! (Although some people who have been anemic a long time somehow compensate and don't notice it.) In addition to fatigue, easy flushing, dizziness and palpitations are common symptoms.

Anemia is caused by impaired red blood cell production, increased destruction, blood loss, or a combination of these factors. Impaired production is classically due to insufficient iron. A common scenario would be a teen or adult woman with heavy menstrual bleeding who eats a less than ideal diet. Toddlers should also be checked for anemia. All men and older women who are found to be anemic need to be carefully evaluated to rule out a variety of chronic diseases that may also cause anemia, such as chronic GI bleeding.

Most anemic people will improve with supplemental iron, but folate and vitamin B12 are also important to red blood cell production and those may be more the issue: the size of your red blood cells gives your doctor a clue about the cause. Another helpful lab test is ferritin: this is a measurement of the body's iron stores.

Supplements may be necessary but the very best treatment is FOOD. Vegetarians may have more difficulty with anemia because the optimal iron sources are meat (especially red meat) which contains very absorbable iron. Green leafy vegetables such as kale, beet greens, broccoli, collard greens and spinach contain lots of iron (in a less absorbable form): steam lightly and add some lemon juice to promote absorption. Other nonmeat sources of iron include tofu, beans, lentils, almonds and molasses. Cooking with cast iron pots also adds some iron to your food.

Iron supplementation can be difficult. Iron sulphate is the most inexpensive, most frequently prescribed, and most difficult to absorb form of iron. Iron sulphate constipates most people. Iron citrate and iron picolinate, for example, are a bit more expensive but much more easily absorbed and are not constipating. Clearly some anemic people eat or take apparently sufficient iron but do not absorb it. Taking the iron while eating protein increases stomach acid which is crucial for iron absorption. Taking the iron with vitamin C also enhances absorption, and some supplements include vitamin C for this reason. Liquid iron supplements are also likely to be better absorbed.

So why not just give everyone extra iron? Because if you don't need it, supplemental iron can actually be harmful. It can be irritating to the digestive system and feed any "bad" gut bugs that might be around. Excess iron is also part of "oxidative stress" that long-term can lead to such illnesses as heart disease and cancer. Therefore, not everyone should take a multivitamin with iron; women who are not anemic and most men in particular should look for a multivitamin without iron.

It's actually normal in pregnancy to become slightly anemic because your blood volume increases, diluting your red blood cells. However, many pregnant women become quite anemic which will make the pregnancy, birth and recovery much harder. Paradoxically, you're likely to bleed more during the birth if you're anemic, compounding the problem. As a midwife I treat anemia in pregnancy aggressively for this reason, with diet and supplements.

If you have any doubts about whether you are anemic, contact your health care practitioner for an inexpensive blood test to find out. You may be surprised at how much better you feel with simple treatment.

Note: This article is not meant to substitute for direct medical advice. For more details, references to this article or questions, email Dr. Ohgushi at sao@imagina.com, or call her at 503-703-7825 to schedule a free 20 minute consultation. OFFICE: 2304 E. Burnside, Suite 101, by appointment only.

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