

Low iron, iron deficiency, or iron deficiency anemia

If your blood test shows **anemia**, that means your level of **hemoglobin** (red blood) is lower than normal. Your blood test can also show low levels of **iron** (ferritin), which is used for making hemoglobin.

Causes

Your iron level is affected by your body's iron stores before pregnancy, as well as the iron you eat from foods and supplements. To support a growing fetus, pregnant women require more iron than usual.

Symptoms

Some patients feel tired, dizzy, pale, short of breath, or palpitations (rapid heartbeat).

Why you need iron supplements

Iron is important for your baby's growth, as well as helping you recover from blood loss at delivery. It is very difficult to correct iron deficiency from foods alone. Your prenatal vitamin does not have enough iron if you have low iron levels.

Choosing an iron supplement

We often suggest Palafer or Feramax because of once daily dosing and better tolerability. They do not require a prescription. Talk to your pharmacist, because they are kept behind the pharmacist's counter. Other options are available including the following:

<i>Iron supplement</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Iron dose per tablet/capsule</i>	<i>Cost per 30 days</i>	<i>Likelihood of GI side effects</i>
Ferrous sulphate	1-2 times a day	60 mg elemental iron per 300mg tablet	Less than \$5	***
Ferrous gluconate	2-3 times a day	35 mg elemental iron per 300mg tablet	Less than \$5	**
Ferrous fumarate (e.g. Palafer)	Once a day	100 mg elemental iron per 300mg tablet	\$5-25	**
Polysaccharide-iron complex (e.g. Feramax)	Once a day	150 mg elemental iron per 150mg capsule	\$5-\$25	*

How to take iron supplements

Take iron supplements on an empty stomach and ideally with a vitamin-C rich food/drink. Avoid taking it with calcium (including dairy and TUMS antacids). Start taking one tablet daily, and then increase to the recommended frequency if tolerated. Continue taking iron for the rest of the pregnancy (possibly postpartum as well). It may take weeks for hemoglobin to improve.

Side effects and what to do

Side effects can include nausea, bloating, and/or constipation. Your stool may become dark as well. If you experience side effects, try to take the iron supplement every second day instead, which has recently been shown to absorb just as well.

Iron in food

The information at www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthlinkbc-files/iron-foods may help you find iron-rich food choices you can include in your diet.

How to manage constipation:

Pregnancy often causes constipation (harder and more difficult to move bowel movements).

Water

Increase the amount of water you drink daily (2 glasses more than your usual).

Fibre

Try to make sure you are getting enough fibre from your foods. Most people are surprised to find out their diet is not high in fibre, even when they are eating what they thought was a healthy diet. The recommended amount of dietary fibre for an adult woman is 25-30 gms per day. This can be difficult to get from foods. One simple strategy to get half of the daily-recommended fibre is to include a serving of a high fibre cereal such as 'All-Bran Buds' into your diet. This would give you an additional 13 gms of fibre from the 1/3 cup serving (approximately 2 heaping tablespoons). Sprinkled onto yogurt provides a crunchy topping or the high fibre cereal can replace a portion of your usual cold cereal if you prefer.

For some people, eating a few dried prunes or drinking a small glass of prune juice daily, will also help manage constipation. Prunes and prune juice contain sorbitol, which is a naturally occurring sugar alcohol, sorbitol, that can have a mild laxative effect. Prunes and prune juice are best used in combination with a diet high in fibre and fluids.

A short list of some common foods and the fibre content of these foods is listed below. Health Link BC can provide more information about fibre in foods or you can call 811 to speak to a nutritionist.

www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthlinkbc-files/fibre , www.nlockfood.ca/en/Articles/Fibre/

Food		Portion	Fibre per serving
Brown bread		1 slice	2 gm
Multigrain bread		1 slice	3 gm
	Special K cereal	1 cup	0 gm
	Rice Krispy cereal	1.2 cup	1 gm
	Shreddies cereal	1 cup	6 gm
	All Bran Buds cereal	1/3 cup	13 gm
Medium apple		1	5 gm
Medium banana		1	4 gm
Prunes		5	3 gm
Small orange		1	2.3 gm
Romaine lettuce		1 cup	1 gm
Broccoli		1 cup	2.4 gm

Exercise

Exercise will help with constipation. Aim for moderate-intensity exercise, at least 150 minutes over 1 week, for example 30 minutes a day.

Medications for constipation

Some constipation treatments are safe to take throughout the pregnancy, and available at most pharmacies or grocery stores:

- Fibre products – e.g. Metamucil or Benefiber
- PEG 3350 products – e.g. Restoralax or Lax-a-day