Dear Alice,

I am anemic and I was wondering what the adverse effects of this condition are. I don’t seem to be noticing any.

Answer

Dear Reader,

Sometimes people with anemia don’t notice any adverse effects just like what you are experiencing now. If your anemia is mild enough, it may not cause any symptoms or the symptoms may appear so minor they are hard to notice. However, if your anemia gets worse, you may begin to experience symptoms. Keep your eye out for these:

- Fatigue
- Weakness
- Pale skin
- Shortness of breath
- A fast or irregular heartbeat
- Chest pain
- Dizziness
- Fainting
- Cognitive difficulties
- Cold hands and feet
- Headache
- Pica

It can sometimes be difficult to tell if a symptom you are experiencing is caused by anemia or something else. For example, lack of sleep can often result in fatigue and cognitive difficulties, both of which are known symptoms of anemia. Anemia does carry the risk of serious complications, especially if it becomes severe. This is why it’s important to monitor your symptoms (or lack thereof) and be mindful if they should change (or suddenly appear).

Like a headache or fever, anemia is a symptom, not a disease. Thus, having anemia usually points to some underlying health issue. Anemia is defined as not having enough healthy red blood cells to bring the needed amount of oxygen to the cells all over your body. Anemia can cause anything from mild dizziness during exercise to extreme, chronic fatigue, and, in some cases, even death. There are many different kinds of anemia, each caused by different things.
such as nutrient deficiencies, excessive bleeding, infection, or genetic disorders. Risk factors for anemia include:

- **Diets low in certain nutrients** (such as iron, folate, vitamin B$_{12}$, each of which help to build healthy red blood cells).
- **Intestinal disorders** which may limit your ability to adequately absorb key nutrients (such as those mentioned above).
- **Menstruation** which causes the body to lose red blood cells.
- **Pregnancy** which requires your body to provide enough iron to grow red blood cells for both you and your growing fetus.
- **Chronic conditions** such as ulcers, cancer, kidney failure, or liver failure, all of which can lead to the loss of red blood cells.
- **Families with histories of having inheritable anemia** (such as thalassemia and sickle cell disease) are at an increased risk of being affected by anemia.

While there is nothing that can be done to prevent or cure genetically-based anemia like thalassemia and sickle cell disease, other types of anemia can be treated or avoided by maintaining a healthy and varied diet. For this purpose, experts recommend diets that limit alcohol and are rich in:

- **Iron**: found in meats, beans, lentils and dark leafy greens.
- **Folate**: found in citrus fruits and juices, dark leafy greens, bananas, and fortified breads, pastas, and cereals.
- **Vitamin B$_{12}$**: found in meat and dairy products and often in fortified soy products
- **Vitamin C** (which aids iron absorption): found in melons, berries, and citrus fruits.

If you suspect that you have anemia but haven’t been diagnosed by a healthcare provider, you may want to schedule an appointment so that you can know for sure. Columbia students on the Morningside campus can make an appointment with Medical Services [4]. Columbia students at the Medical Center can make an appointment with Student Health [5].
Go Ask Alice! is not an emergency or instant response service.

If you are in an urgent situation, please visit our Emergency page to view a list of 24 hour support services and hotlines.

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