

## Iron deficiency <sup>[1]</sup>

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 Arnold Schwarzenegger <sup>[2]</sup>, pumping iron through your blood in mineral form is critical to your overall health. An adequate supply of iron from diet or supplements fuels the production of healthy red blood cells. Iron is necessary to form hemoglobin, which is a protein-iron compound attached to red blood cells that actually carries oxygen from the lungs to all of the body's cells. If your blood levels of iron are low, you may develop iron deficiency anemia. Basically, this means your body isn't able to transport oxygen efficiently and make good use of the air you're inhaling. If you don't take steps to address an iron deficiency, you may start experiencing a number of adverse symptoms that could get worse over time (more specifics on them later). The good news is that getting enough iron pumping through your body is typically much easier than lifting that iron at the gym.

You mention that you've been told you lack iron in your blood. Did you get this news from a health care provider after a blood test? If so, did they evaluate you for symptoms of iron deficiency anemia? This is key because some individuals are iron deficient without experiencing anemia (lacking healthy red blood cells). If untreated, iron deficiency may progress to iron deficiency anemia, which is where you may start to see more complications. Depending on how iron deficient you are, symptoms of iron deficiency anemia may include:

- Fatigue
- Irritability and trouble concentrating
- Headaches and dizziness
- Shortness of breath
- Brittle nails
- Pica, or cravings to eat non-food substances such as dirt, ice, or soap

*List modified from [MedlinePlus](#) [3].*

These symptoms often get worse with time if the iron deficiency goes unaddressed. Additionally, it's possible that decreased iron levels may be a sign of a more serious chronic condition. Therefore, it may be beneficial to speak with a medical professional to determine the cause of the iron deficiency and the best way to address it.

With that said, you may be interested to know a common way to address 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, egg yolks, and other lean meats (such as beef and pork). For the vegetarians and vegans of the world, beans, wheat germ, whole grains, and even iron-fortified breakfast cereals are some plant sources of iron. Interestingly, if heme iron and non-heme iron are eaten together, your body can absorb more of the non-heme iron than if the non-heme iron were eaten alone. Additionally, adding foods or drinks that are good sources of vitamin C along with your food can also help your body more easily absorb iron. Regardless of your food preferences, any iron in your diet is better than no iron!

Additionally, some populations are more likely to be at risk of iron deficiency than others and might benefit from paying extra attention to their iron intake. These include:

- Pregnant people
- Girls in their teens
- People with renal or gastrointestinal diseases
- People with cancer
- Menstruating people 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 to bring their iron levels up to the recommended levels — but this isn't the answer for everyone. There are potential adverse side effects of taking iron supplements, such as nausea and vomiting, in addition to being having serious risks 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.

Hopefully this info helps you iron out your thoughts!

Alice!

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