Dear Alice,

My sister has been told by one doctor that eating ice is effective for an iron deficiency. Another doctor says that this is balderdash and not effective.

What is the deal? Which opinion is correct? Why is there no consensus on the feedback physicians give for this subject?

I also would like pointers to more information for this topic.

Thanks.

Answer

Dear Reader,

Hearing conflicting medical advice can certainly make your head spin! Luckily, your sister has a trusty sibling who looks out for her health. To add a little clarity to your dilemma: there doesn’t seem to be any definitive evidence that suggests eating ice treats iron deficiency. Water (in the solid, liquid, or gaseous state) neither contains iron nor corrects iron deficiency. That being said, there seems to be an interesting relationship between iron deficiency and eating ice — some researchers think that iron deficiency may be associated with an urge to eat ice. The good news is there may be some dietary sources and supplements she can take to boost her iron.

Iron deficiency can have a number of causes. For some folks, iron deficiency may be the result of not eating enough iron-rich foods, while others may find that their body is unable to absorb the iron they ingest. Outside of food-related causes, iron deficiency can also be caused by blood loss from an underlying medical condition (e.g., peptic ulcer or colorectal cancer), heavy menstrual periods, or pregnancy. It’s helpful to seek medical attention to properly assess any underlying conditions to be able to determine appropriate treatment options. If the culprit is a lack of iron in a person’s diet, a health care provider may recommend over-the-counter iron tablets (in a specific dosage), along with specific instructions, to maximize absorption of the supplements.

While iron supplements are a quick and easy way to get adequate iron intake, it’s preferable to
get essential nutrients from food rather than supplements. In fact, the body can better digest and absorb nutrients in the amount and form in which it naturally occurs. The good news is that there are sources of iron to suit any dietary preference, from meat-lovers (e.g., oysters, chicken, turkey, lean beef) to vegans (e.g., beans, lentils, dark green leafy vegetables, tofu). To better understand specific dietary needs and how they might overlap with food preferences, it might be helpful to talk with a registered dietitian. Not sure where to look for one? You could check out the [Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics](https://www.eatright.org) website or ask a medical professional for a referral.

As previously noted, though there isn’t evidence to show that eating ice treats iron deficiency, there may be a potential link between iron deficiency and the urge to eat ice. Craving non-nutritive, non-food items is considered pica behavior; specifically, there’s a form of pica behavior called pagophagia, or ice pica, which involves compulsive ice chewing. Some research suggests that chewing ice seems to increase alertness and response time in people with iron deficiency, and in some cases ice cravings were resolved when they were given iron supplements. However, it’s worth noting that there isn’t enough research to make a clear connection.

If your sister is still struggling to learn more about these issues, you might encourage her to seek out a third or even fourth medical opinion, if needed. Sometimes, a little extra digging and questioning is required to get to the bottom of a health-related concern. Hopefully though, this information helped turn your investigation of eating ice and iron deficiency into a cold case.

Alice!

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