

Anemia

A person with anemia has fewer red blood cells in his or her blood than the normal level. Red blood cells carry oxygen to all the cells in the body. When the number of red blood cells is lower than normal, less oxygen is carried in the blood.

Signs

A person with anemia may not notice any signs. As anemia gets worse, you may have:

- Fatigue – feel weak or tired
- Dizziness or feel faint
- Cold hands or feet
- Headaches
- Pale skin or nails that break easily
- Trouble thinking clearly or a hard time concentrating
- Shortness of breath or chest pain
- A fast or irregular heart beat
- Fewer menstrual periods or increased bleeding during menstrual periods

Talk to your doctor if you have any of these signs.

Call 911 if you have shortness of breath or chest pain.

Causes

The causes of anemia include:

- Problems with how iron is used by the body
- Not eating enough iron-rich foods
- Bleeding or blood loss, such as from heavy menstrual periods
- Pregnancy
- A lack of folate or B-12 vitamins in the body
- Treatments for some diseases, such as cancer, that make it harder for the body to make new red blood cells
- Sickle-cell disease where the body destroys too many red blood cells
- Immune system problems where the body destroys or cannot make red blood cells
- Babies less than one year old who drink cow's or goat's milk
- Babies who are fed formula that does not have extra iron

Your Care

Your doctor will do tests to find the cause of your anemia and to plan your treatment. You may need to:

- Eat a healthy diet that includes fruits, vegetables, breads, dairy products, meat and fish. Eat more iron-rich foods such as lean beef, pork or lamb, poultry, seafood, iron-fortified cereals and grains, green leafy vegetables such as spinach, nuts and beans. Your doctor may want you to meet with a dietitian to plan healthy meals.
- Take vitamin or iron supplements.
- Get a blood transfusion to treat blood loss. Blood is given through an intravenous (IV) line into a blood vessel.
- Have other treatments such as medicines or surgery to treat the cause of your anemia.

Talk to your doctor or nurse if you have any questions or concerns.