

Iron-Deficiency Anaemia in Pregnancy

Been feeling unusually tired during your pregnancy? While a common pregnancy symptom, your fatigue might also be a sign of iron-deficiency anaemia. ■ WORDS **NURULHUDA SUHAIMI**

Fatigue is a common pregnancy symptom most women will experience while they are expecting. After all, your body is adjusting to the growing foetus inside you. Besides dealing with the extra weight, other discomforts that might come with pregnancy such as backaches or muscle cramps can affect your sleep quality too, which will then exacerbate your exhaustion.

But have you thought about whether your fatigue is caused by a lack of iron in your body? If you have been feeling particularly drained lately, to the point where it is affecting your ability to perform daily activities, you might have iron-deficiency anaemia.

Iron-deficiency anaemia refers to “a condition in which there are inadequate iron stores in the body, leading to a reduction in the amount of red blood cells in the blood circulation”, explains associate consultant Dr Freda Khoo, Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, KK Women’s and Children’s Hospital.

Ensuring your body has enough iron is vital, even if you are not pregnant. This is because your body requires iron to produce haemoglobin, which is a protein molecule found in red blood cells responsible for transporting oxygen to the rest of the body. Thus, a lack of iron will, in turn, lead to low levels of haemoglobin, which means your muscles and organs will not receive enough oxygen to function optimally. This can result in you facing a greater risk of developing further health complications such as illnesses and infections since low iron levels affect the immune system, or heart issues like an unusually fast heart rate or even heart failure.

For pregnant women, having enough iron in their bodies is essential as “the blood volume expands to accommodate the bodily changes associated with pregnancy”, says Dr Khoo.

“Moreover, the unborn baby needs to store adequate iron for the first six months of life before he starts consuming solid foods. This iron requirement needs to be obtained from the mother during pregnancy,” she adds.

Effects on Mother and Foetus

Fortunately, if your iron-deficiency anaemia is mild, it should not pose any severe health problems during your pregnancy if the anaemia is taken care of early on. However, you may find yourself feeling tired more easily.

For pregnant women with severe iron-deficiency anaemia, Dr Khoo highlights that they may have "leg cramps or fainting spells".

Iron-deficiency anaemia may also affect the foetus if it is severe, or if the mild anaemia goes untreated.

According to Dr Anthony Siow, senior consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist at Gleneagles Hospital, the effects to the foetus include preterm birth, foetal growth restriction, intrauterine foetal death, as well as childhood developmental problems.

Are You at Risk?

There are several factors that may increase a pregnant woman's risk of developing iron-deficiency anaemia, including:

Pregnancy

Your pregnancy itself can increase your risk of developing iron-deficiency anaemia. This is because, during pregnancy, your body will use up more iron to produce extra blood for your baby, says Dr Siow. Hence, if you are not consuming extra iron during your pregnancy to compensate for the higher levels of iron that is being used up by your body, you will more likely develop iron-deficiency anaemia.

Nutrition

Your nutrition can also affect your likelihood of developing iron-deficiency anaemia. As explained by Dr Khoo, "If a woman's dietary intake is lacking in iron-rich foods such as green leafy vegetables and red meat, this would cause a decreased amount of iron stores in the body pre-pregnancy, and would then lead to iron-deficiency anaemia very easily."

This is especially important for pregnant women who are vegetarians. Since they can't get their iron from meat, they need to ensure that they are consuming other sources of food that will provide them with enough iron to satisfy the extra amounts required during pregnancy.

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Blood loss

Any type of blood loss will cause you to lose iron. If your body does not have enough iron to make up for the loss of iron, you can develop iron-deficiency anaemia. An example is blood lost from internal bleeding, such as ulcers in your stomach or bleeding piles, highlights Dr Siow.

Losing excessive blood during your previous pregnancy, or having heavy menstrual bleeding, can also lead to iron-deficiency anaemia, says Dr Khoo.

Duration between pregnancies

According to Dr Khoo, “very closely spaced pregnancies” are also risk factors for the development of iron-deficiency anaemia. This is because the short time between both pregnancies does not allow your body to replenish its iron stores before the next pregnancy.

Symptoms to Look Out For

The presence of iron-deficiency anaemia might be hard to identify because the symptoms for it are not very obvious, and they might be similar to some health conditions that come with a normal pregnancy.

If you do experience any of these symptoms, it is best for you to visit your doctor to check if the symptoms are due to iron-deficiency anaemia. The symptoms include “tiredness, loss of energy, difficulty in concentrating, giddiness, shortness of breath, headache, and a sensation of unusually noticeable rapid heartbeat”, as well as pale skin that might be noticed by your doctor or the other people around you, says Dr Khoo.

How is it Treated?

There are several options available in the treatment of iron-deficiency anaemia, depending on the extent of the anaemia, or when during the pregnancy it was detected. Dr Khoo discusses the following treatment options:

If your iron-deficiency anaemia is mild or discovered early in the pregnancy, taking oral iron supplements in tablet form is recommended to treat the anaemia, as there is still sufficient time to increase the level of iron throughout the course of the pregnancy.

“Vitamin C taken simultaneously aids absorption, thus it is good to take iron supplements together with fresh orange juice or vitamin C tablets,” advises Dr Khoo.

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For iron-deficiency anaemia that is more severe, you may have to get iron injections. “This mode of treatment is associated with a greater and more rapid rise in red blood cell concentration with fewer side effects compared to oral therapy,” says Dr Khoo.

Iron-deficiency anaemia detected towards the end of the pregnancy may be treated with a blood transfusion. The other two treatment methods mentioned above might not be recommended as they might not be able to build up the iron levels in the body fast enough during the later stages of the pregnancy. However, Dr Khoo highlights that blood transfusions come with associated risks such as “allergic reactions and transmission of blood-borne infections”, which will be discussed by your doctor.

Managing Iron-Deficiency Anaemia

From the beginning stages of your pregnancy, Dr Siow advises taking 30mg of iron supplements a day, as well as 10mg when you have started breastfeeding.

Don’t just rely on supplements, though. You should also ensure your dietary intake includes sufficient iron-rich foods. “There are two forms of iron in foods – heme and non-heme. Heme iron is better absorbed by the body than non-heme iron. Sources of heme iron include red meat, liver, chicken and fish. Sources of non-heme iron include egg yolk, green leafy vegetables, iron-fortified breakfast cereals, dried fruits and nuts,” explains Dr Khoo.

You should also consume foods rich in vitamin C such as fruits and vegetables, or take vitamin C supplements, advises Dr Khoo, because vitamin C will aid in the absorption of non-heme iron. 