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According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), iron deficiency is the most common nutritional deficiency in the U.S., with almost 10 percent of women being considered iron deficient.

Iron is necessary to perform daily functions in the body by transporting oxygen in the blood from the lungs to your brain, muscles and organ tissues. Iron also helps maintain enzyme and cognitive function, regulate cell growth and development, support immunity, optimize nutrient absorption, and help keep hormones balanced.

If you are iron deficient, your vital organs and tissues are not receiving the proper amount of oxygen needed for optimal function. As a result, you may experience any of the following symptoms:

* Pale or yellowing of the skin
* Low energy or chronic fatigue
* Trouble exercising
* Muscle soreness and weakness
* Sores on the tongue or mouth
* Dizziness
* Trouble with concentration or memory
* Restless leg syndrome
* Strange cravings, such as dirt or ice

The amount of iron needed varies with age and gender. Women need more iron than men due to the loss of iron during monthly menstrual cycles. Toddlers need more iron than children because it supports cognitive development and growth, and it can be challenging for them to get it in their diet.

Certain groups of people are at higher risk for iron deficiency and include: vegetarians, anyone who has lost blood due to an accident or recent surgery, pregnant and breastfeeding women, and those with a history of gastrointestinal disorders (i.e. Chrohn’s disease or ulcerative colitis). Additionally, those taking an excessive amount of antacids, experiencing kidney failure or undergoing dialysis treatment may also have a limited ability to absorb essential nutrients like iron.

Fortunately, checking your iron levels is easy and can be done with a simple blood test called a serum ferritin test. The blood test measures ferritin, the carrier molecule of iron, which stores the iron. If your ferritin levels are low, your iron levels are also low.

Elevated ferritin levels may suggest an iron surplus, which is an important marker of cardiovascular risks such as ischemic heart disease. Ferritin levels can also become increased in response to inflammation, infection, or trauma. In addition, excess iron consumption (via drinking water, iron cookware, and consumption of iron containing supplements) can lead to an increase in ferritin levels. There are several other diseases and conditions that can cause high ferritin levels, including B12/folate deficiency anemia, chronic hepatitis and chronic renal disease. It is important to find out if and why your iron levels are high, as high levels can damage body tissues and contribute to serious health issues.

It’s a good idea to have your iron levels checked on a regular basis as part of your blood workup in order to identify any deficiency before it becomes a larger problem. Iron levels can also be checked at any blood donation center, as centers are required to screen the iron levels of all potential donors. Regular monitoring is most important for vegetarians, pregnant women, and those with digestive disorders.

Iron intake can be increased through diet, however, it’s important to consider the type of iron being consumed. Iron found in plant foods is called “non-heme iron,” and the iron found in animal foods is called “heme iron.” Heme iron is more easily absorbed by the body. In fact, sources note that heme iron found in fish, poultry, and meat is absorbed two to three times more effectively than the non-heme iron found in plants. Some of the most iron-rich foods include beef liver, white beans, lentils, spinach, kidney beans, chickpeas, duck, sardines, grass fed beef, lamb, and pumpkin seeds.

Iron-deficiency anemia is very common but, fortunately, easily treated. Start by screening the iron levels of everyone in your family, and then work with a qualified practitioner to get those levels in the optimal range. The result will be an improvement in your overall health, as well as increased energy and improved cell production.