Iron for anaemia in pregnancy

What is anaemia?

Anaemia is a condition in which the number of red blood cells, or the haemoglobin concentration within them, is lower than normal.

Up to 40% of women are anaemic in pregnancy (WHO, 2023). Iron deficiency anaemia is the most common cause of anaemia in pregnancy. Iron is required for your body to make red blood cells, as well as for your baby's growth and development.

Anaemia is associated with an increased chance of infection, length of stay in hospital, blood loss and a negative impact on your quality of life and mental health.

Symptoms of being anaemic include tiredness, weakness, dizziness, skin appearing paler than normal, shortness of breath and heart palpitations.

This leaflet will explain how you can reduce your chances of anaemia in pregnancy and how to increase your iron intake.

How can I reduce my chances of anaemia in pregnancy?

A national project known as PRAMS (Pregnancy Anaemia Management Scotland) aims to improve anaemia management in pregnancy throughout Scotland.

The PRAMS project has shown that taking iron tablets early in pregnancy reduces the chance of becoming anaemic. This is now being offered to all women and birthing people in Scotland.

What will happen?

We will offer you routine blood tests throughout your pregnancy to check your haemoglobin and ferritin levels. Haemoglobin (Hb) is a measure of the iron in your red blood cells, and ferritin is a measure of your body's iron stores. Your care will include:

1. Checking your Hb and ferritin levels at around 8-13 weeks of pregnancy as part of your routine first blood tests.
2. Starting iron supplements after your first appointment with your midwife. Usually this would be one tablet of Ferrous Sulphate 200mg three times a week.
3. Your Hb and ferritin levels will be checked routinely at 28 weeks gestation. If your Hb level drops to below 105g/L, you will be asked to increase your iron intake to one tablet each day.

We will be collecting data as part of the PRAMS project so that we can improve anaemia management across the whole of Lothian. This will be stored securely and will be anonymous.

How should I take my iron supplements?

You should take one tablet three times a week, for example on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. This improves absorption and reduces potential side effects. Taking the tablet with a glass of fresh orange juice on an empty stomach can also improve absorption.

What else I can do to increase my iron intake?

As well as taking iron supplements, there are also dietary changes you can make to help maximise your iron intake.

Best foods to eat which contain iron that are easily absorbed:

- Red meat (avoid liver and liver products as they have high levels of Vitamin A which can be harmful to your baby)
- Poultry
- Fish (try not to have more than two portions of oily fish a week such as sardines, mackerel, pilchards and salmon, and tuna as they may contain high levels of mercury. We recommend no more than two medium tins per week)
- Eggs.

Plant-based foods rich in iron:

- Fortified cereals
- Dried fruit
- Green vegetables, such as peas, broccoli or dark leafy cabbage, spinach or kale
- Beans and pulses, such as lentils, soya beans, kidney beans or chickpeas
- Nuts and seeds
- Dark chocolate
- Tofu
- Brown rice
- Bread, chapatti, pitta bread made with wholemeal flour.

Are there any other benefits?

Improving your iron levels in pregnancy can also:

- Reduce tiredness and increase energy levels
- Reduce your chance of infection
- Reduce your chance of heavy bleeding at the time of birth
- Reduce your time in hospital.

Are there any side effects?

As with any medication, there are some side effects associated with iron supplements.

These include:

- Gastro-intestinal irritation
- Constipation
- Diarrhea
- Nausea
- Dark, tarry, hard stools
- Metallic taste in mouth
- Headaches.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information leaflet.

Please contact your community midwife if you have any further questions or concerns about your medication.

More information about NHS Lothian Maternity Services can be found on our website:

https://weare.nhslothian.scot/maternity