What Parents Should Know About Iron-Deficiency Anemia in Children

Our blood is made of different types of cells that each have special functions. Red blood cells are important because they bring oxygen from the lungs to the rest of our body. Without a good level of red blood cells, our bodies cannot function well.

When a person has anemia, there are fewer red blood cells in their body than expected, taking their age into account. Anemia can have many causes, including not making enough red blood cells or losing too many through bleeding. In children, a lack of iron in their diet can cause a type of anemia called iron-deficiency anemia (IDA). Iron is a nutrient that is necessary in our bodies to make hemoglobin, which is one of the essential building blocks of red blood cells that carries oxygen. Without enough iron, the body struggles to make red blood cells.

Children with IDA often do not have any obvious symptoms. However, they can appear pale or tired. More severe IDA can cause symptoms including irritability, shortness of breath, rapid heart rate, or dizziness. These symptoms are not specific for IDA and can sometimes be attributed to other causes. For example, sometimes attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder is suspected when in fact a child has iron deficiency. Because of this range of symptoms, physicians routinely screen for anemia in young children. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends screening of all infants between age 9 to 12 months for anemia. Screening starts with questions to find risk factors for anemia. If a child is at risk for anemia, a blood test (finger prick or blood draw) is performed, often right in a physician’s office with immediate results.

IDA in childhood usually occurs when children do not eat enough foods that contain iron in their diet. This happens commonly in young children who have poor or picky eating habits. Unfortunately, cow’s milk, which is a good source of calcium, does not contain iron. Drinking too much cow’s milk (more than 2 to 3 cups per day) or starting to drink cow’s milk when younger than 1 year can increase the risk of developing IDA. Other risk factors include being born prematurely or being exposed to lead.

Fortunately, many foods are good sources of iron and can fulfill our bodies’ iron needs. Meats, poultry, and fish are wonderful sources of iron, as are dark-green leafy vegetables, chickpeas, lentils, and white beans. Many cereals and grain products are fortified with iron. Foods rich in vitamin C, such as citrus fruits, tomatoes, cauliflower, and broccoli, can help our bodies absorb iron when eaten with iron-containing foods. Eating a well-balanced diet can help prevent IDA. Sometimes, children need more iron than their diet can provide. If this happens, a physician will prescribe iron supplements, which can be a liquid, a chewable, or a swallowed pill depending on age and ability. By providing your child with a variety of nutritious foods at each meal, you will be giving your child the iron necessary to prevent IDA and thrive!