

INFORMATION FOR PATIENTS

Optimising your iron levels in pregnancy

Reducing anaemia and preparing for birth

Why are iron levels important in pregnancy?

Iron is essential for making healthy red blood cells, which carry oxygen around your body. During pregnancy, your body needs more iron to support:

- Your baby's growth and development.
- Your placenta.
- Your increased blood volume.

Having normal iron levels before birth is important because it:

- Helps your body cope with blood loss during birth.
- Reduces the chance of you needing a blood transfusion.
- Supports your recovery after birth.
- Improves your energy levels and wellbeing.

What is anaemia?

Anaemia happens when your body does not have enough healthy red blood cells, usually due to low iron levels. Anaemia is common in pregnancy and can develop gradually.

Why treating anaemia is important

If anaemia is not treated, it can increase the risk of:

- Feeling very tired or unwell during pregnancy.
- Increased chance of infection.
- Heavier blood loss during birth.
- Your baby being born early or smaller than expected.

Treating anaemia helps keep both you and your baby healthy.

What are the symptoms of anaemia?

You may not always notice symptoms, but some people experience:

- Feeling very tired or lacking energy.
- Dizziness or headaches.
- Shortness of breath.

- Looking paler than usual – this may show as paler skin (more noticeable if you have lighter skin), or as pale lips, gums, palms, or nail beds (which may be easier to notice if you have black or brown skin).
- Heart palpitations.

Speak to your midwife if you have any concerns.

How is anaemia checked?

You will be offered blood tests during pregnancy:

- At your booking appointment.
- Again at around 28 weeks.

These tests check your haemoglobin (a measure of red blood cells, which can indicate iron levels).

Preparing your body for birth

You can think of your iron levels as your body's 'reserve' for labour and birth. Optimising your iron levels helps your body cope better during labour and recover afterwards.

To prepare for birth:

- Eat a balanced, iron-rich diet.
- Take recommended vitamin supplements.
- Take iron tablets if advised.
- Attend all blood tests and follow-up appointments.
- Seek advice if you feel unwell or symptoms worsen.

How can I improve and maintain healthy iron levels?

1. Eat iron-rich foods

Good sources of iron include:

- Red meat, chicken, and fish.
- Eggs.
- Tofu.
- Lentils, beans, and chickpeas.
- Green leafy vegetables (e.g. spinach, kale, broccoli).
- Fortified breakfast cereals.
- Dried fruit such as dried apricots.
- Fruits such as strawberries.

Iron from meat is absorbed more easily than plant-based sources.

2. Help your body absorb iron

To improve iron absorption:

- Eat foods rich in vitamin C (e.g. oranges, berries, peppers, strawberries).
- Take iron tablets with a vitamin C drink (e.g. orange juice).

Iron is best absorbed on an empty stomach but can be taken with food if side effects occur.

Avoid at the same time as iron:

- Tea and coffee.
- Milk and dairy products.
- Antacids (leave at least a **two-hour gap**).

3. Take recommended supplements

Folic acid

Take 400 micrograms daily before pregnancy and until 12 weeks. Some people may need a higher dose (5 mg) – your midwife or doctor will advise.

Folic acid supports your baby's brain and spine development.

Vitamin D

Take 10 micrograms (400 IU) daily throughout pregnancy and breastfeeding.

Vitamin D supports bone health, immune function, and overall wellbeing.

Healthy Start vitamins

If you are eligible, you may receive free Healthy Start vitamins, which include:

- Folic acid.
- Vitamin D.
- Vitamin C.

Ask your midwife for more information.

4. Take iron supplements if advised

If your iron levels are low, your midwife or doctor may recommend iron tablets which are usually taken once a day. These help build your iron stores before birth and reduce the effects of blood loss during labour.

Once anaemia develops, diet alone is usually not enough to correct it, and iron supplements are often needed.

Tips for taking iron tablets:

- Take on an empty stomach if possible.
- Take with a drink containing vitamin C.
- Avoid tea, coffee, milk, or antacids at the same time (leave a two-hour gap for antacids).
- Side effects (e.g. constipation or nausea) are common but manageable.

Speak to your midwife if you are struggling to take them.

When should I seek advice?

Contact your midwife or maternity unit if you:

- Feel extremely tired or unwell.
- Have worsening shortness of breath or palpitations.
- Cannot tolerate iron tablets.
- Have concerns about your pregnancy.

Key messages:

- Anaemia is common in pregnancy but often preventable.
- Optimising your iron levels helps prepare your body for birth.
- Eating well and taking supplements is important.
- Blood tests help detect problems early.
- Treatment is safe and effective.

Further information

If you have any questions, please speak to your midwife or maternity team. For more information, visit the NHS website: www.nhs.uk

Important

This leaflet is for guidance only and does not replace advice from your midwife or doctor.

Further sources of information

NHS Choices: www.nhs.uk/conditions

Our website: www.sfh-tr.nhs.uk

Patient Experience Team (PET)

PET is available to help with any of your compliments, concerns, or complaints, and will ensure a prompt and efficient service.

King's Mill Hospital: 01623 672222

Newark Hospital: 01636 685692

Email: sfh-tr.PET@nhs.net

If you would like this information in an alternative format, for example large print or easy read, or if you need help with communicating with us, for example because you use British Sign Language, please let us know. You can call the Patient Experience Team on 01623 672222 or email sfh-tr.PET@nhs.net.

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