

## Anaemia - FAQs

### Introduction

Anaemia is the condition when the haemoglobin level in the body falls below normal, i.e., <11 g/dL.

Haemoglobin is the protein present in the red blood cells (RBCs) that carries oxygen from the lungs to the body cells. There are approximately 400 types of anaemia, e.g., nutritional, thalassaemia, sickle cell, haemolytic, etc., the commonest of which is nutritional anaemia.

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### What are the Causes of Nutritional Anaemia?

Anaemia may develop if there is a low intake of nutrients in the diet (especially iron, folic acid and vitamin B12), inadequate absorption of these nutrients or excessive loss of nutrients or blood.

The common reasons for decreased intake or absorption are as follows:

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- Being a vegetarian
- Eating less amounts of meat, fish and eggs or not at all
- Eating less amounts of foods that help in the absorption of the nutrients (e.g., vitamin C is required for the absorption of iron)
- Being on a diet (without proper guidance)
- Eating a lot of junk food
- Not taking a healthy diet (fruits, vegetables, etc.)
- Smoking or drinking alcohol
- Surgery of the stomach or small intestine
- Worm infestation

Other reason for nutritional anaemia is excessive loss of blood. Some of the causes of this could be as below:

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- Heavy, long or frequent menstrual periods
- Loss of blood during delivery
- Being on certain medications, e.g., pain killers (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs ) or medicines that suppress the immune system
- Chronic diseases (e.g., cancer, ulcerative colitis, or rheumatoid arthritis)

There are times, such as pregnancy and breastfeeding, when the need of these nutrients increases. If these

needs are not met with a proper diet or nutritional supplements, it can lead to nutritional anaemia.

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What are the Signs and Symptoms of Anaemia?

Some common signs and symptoms of anaemia are as follows:

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Tiredness or lack of energy	Paleness
Hair loss	Dizziness
Irritability	Weakness
Reduced physical capacity	Rapid or irregular heartbeat
Chest pain	Headache
Shortness of breath	Problems concentrating
Lowered Resistance to infections	

Because there is a decrease in the ability to absorb oxygen from the lungs, serious problems, such as organ damage, can occur in prolonged and severe anaemia that is not treated.

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How is Anaemia Diagnosed?

To diagnose nutritional anaemia, your doctor may order the following blood tests:

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- Red blood count and haemoglobin level - to know the severity of anaemia.
- Blood levels of iron, vitamin B12, folic acid, and other vitamins and minerals - to know the cause of nutritional anaemia.

Other tests may also be done, such as sonography, stool test and tests to find the causes of decreased absorption or excessive blood loss.

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How can Nutritional Anaemia be Treated?

The treatment depends on the cause of nutritional anaemia and needs to be addressed accordingly.

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Diet

Diet plays a very important role in the management of anaemia. Some tips to manage nutritional anaemia are as follows:

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- Have a diet rich in iron, folic acid, vitamin B12 and other minerals, proteins and vitamins. Here are some foods that are rich sources of nutrients:
  - Iron - liver, meat, poultry, fish, cereals, green leafy vegetables, legumes, nuts, oilseeds, jaggery, dried fruits, beet
  - Folic acid - black-eyed peas (chawli), kidney beans (rajma), broccoli, pulses, dal, spinach (palak), beet, egg, oranges, tomatoes
  - Vitamin B12 - eggs, meat, milk and milk products, liver, kidney, poultry, shellfish
- Incorporate a lot of fruits and vegetables in the diet as a source of essential minerals and vitamins; this will help regain lost energy and increase the number of RBCs.
- It is also very important to incorporate vitamin C in the diet; this helps the body absorb iron. Some sources of vitamin C are oranges, lemons, tomatoes, etc.
- Have foods that are fortified with iron, folic acid, vitamin B12 and other nutrients, e.g., bread, cornflakes, flour, juices, cooking oils, etc.
- Drink plenty of fluids, e.g., water, juices, coconut water, etc.
- Avoid carbonated and caffeinated drinks, e.g., tea, coffee, cola, etc., and eating junk food as it may interfere with the absorption of the nutrients.
- Avoid taking foods rich in calcium (milk, cheese, paneer) and phytates (present in some nuts, grains, seeds) along with iron-rich foods.
- Avoid smoking and drinking alcohol as this prevents the body from absorbing the nutrients from the food.

### Nutritional Supplements

Nutritional supplements will be required for the prevention or treatment of anaemia, irrespective of the cause. Depending on whether the anaemia is mild or moderate, an iron and/or folic acid and /or vitamin B12 and /or multivitamin supplements may be required after consulting the doctor. In case of severe anaemia, the doctor may also suggest administering injections.

Please consult your doctor to know more about the right kind of medicines and nutrition for you.

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