



Empowering Children. Supporting Families. Building Brighter Futures.

Resource 055 | Growth and nutrition

Iron deficiency

What it means

Iron deficiency means the body's iron stores are inadequate. It can occur before anemia develops. Iron supports blood production and other body and brain functions. Fatigue or developmental concerns do not establish iron deficiency on their own; assessment identifies whether iron is actually low. [1]

Causes and risk factors

Causes include insufficient iron intake, increased needs during growth, prematurity-related low stores, blood loss, or problems absorbing iron. A diet with large amounts of milk displacing suitable iron-containing foods can contribute in some children. The cause should be reviewed rather than assuming that diet is the only factor. [1,2]

General family education. A concern deserves assessment, but this guide does not diagnose a child or prescribe treatment.



Signs and everyday impact

Some children have no obvious signs. Others may be tired, irritable, have reduced appetite or attention, or crave nonfood substances. Pallor is more likely when anemia is also present. These findings can have other explanations. [1,2]

Assessment and diagnosis

A clinician reviews diet, growth, birth history, health, and risk factors. Blood tests may assess hemoglobin and iron stores such as ferritin, with interpretation that considers inflammation or illness. Current screening recommendations depend on age and risk; the care team determines suitable testing. [1,2]

Treatment and therapy

Confirmed deficiency may require prescribed iron and dietary changes, with investigation and treatment of the cause. Diet alone may not replenish substantial deficiency promptly. Product, dose, duration, and follow-up testing are individualized. Treatment for anemia differs in detail from treatment for low stores without anemia. [1,2,3]

Support at home

Give prescribed iron as instructed and discuss side effects or difficulties rather than stopping silently. Keep iron products securely away from children because overdose is dangerous. Use appropriate iron-containing foods and seek dietetic help if feeding restrictions make the plan difficult.

When to seek help

Suspected iron overdose requires emergency poison or medical advice immediately. Severe lethargy, breathing difficulty, fainting, or rapidly worsening illness needs urgent care.

Questions for your care team

- Is iron deficiency present with or without anemia?
- What caused it and what treatment is required?
- When should iron stores and symptoms be reassessed?



Podcast preparation

Use this outline to develop a later podcast script.

Suggested opening

Welcome to Mariel Early Intervention. Today we discuss iron deficiency. Iron deficiency means the body's iron stores are inadequate. This is general education; each child needs individualized care.

Opening: Define the topic and its developmental context.

Understanding: Explain causes and signs without inviting self-diagnosis.

Assessment: Describe evaluation and distinguish screening from diagnosis.

Support: Discuss treatment, therapy, and practical family supports.

Closing: Explain urgent signs and one clear next step.

Misconception to address: A normal hemoglobin result does not always rule out low iron stores.

Before recording: update clinical references and local service details, arrange clinical review, and use fully consented or fictional examples.

Terms in plain language

- Ferritin: a marker used to help assess stored iron.
- Hemoglobin: the oxygen-carrying protein in red blood cells.
- Anemia: reduced red blood cell or hemoglobin levels for age.

Sources and further reading

Sources accessed 3 October 2026. Numbered references support the clinical overview. Treatment availability and referral routes vary by country.

[1] Anemia in Children and Teens: Parent FAQs

https://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/chronic/Pages/Anemia-and-Your-Child.aspx?alt_id=c6bbd

[2] Iron Deficiency & Iron Deficiency Anemia: AAP Updates Screening, Prevention & Treatment Guidance

<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/news/Pages/iron-deficiency-anemia-prevention-screening-treatment-AAP-updates-guidance.aspx>

[3] Faltering Weight in Children: Parent FAQs

<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/Glands-Growth-Disorders/Pages/faltering-weight-in-children-parent-faqs.aspx>