What is iron deficiency anemia?

Iron deficiency anemia (IDA) happens when the body is missing the iron needed to produce healthy red blood cells that carry oxygen to organs and tissues.

Symptoms in teens may include:

- Weakness
- Extreme tiredness
- Cold hands and feet
- Skin rash
- Brittle nails
- Poor appetite
- Pica (craving non-food items such as ice or dirt)

What causes iron deficiency anemia in teens?

- Poor diet that lacks iron-rich foods
- Gastrointestinal (GI) problems like Crohn’s disease or ulcerative colitis, which can lower the body’s ability to absorb iron and/or cause bleeding in the GI tract
- Stomach ulcers that cause blood loss
- Growth spurts because the body needs more iron to keep up with red blood cell production
- Certain types of cancer
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Potential complications of iron deficiency anemia in teens

- Teens with anemia may be too tired to do anything physical or might struggle to stay focused at school.
- If left untreated, anemia may also lead to:
  - Delays in learning, growth and development
  - Depression
  - Heart problems
  - Increased risk of infection

Getting enough iron

To help your teen get enough iron, focus on feeding them foods that are rich in iron, such as:

- Meats: beef, pork, liver and other organ meats
- Shellfish: clams, mussels and oysters, and oily fish such as sardines and anchovies
- Legumes: lima beans, black-eyed peas, lentils and peas
- Cereal, bread, pasta and rice enriched with added nutrients
- Poultry: chicken and turkey (especially dark meat)
- Leafy green vegetables: spinach, broccoli, kale and collard greens
- Fruits: apricots, prunes and raisins

Treatment for anemia

If your teen has anemia from low iron, there are several ways it can be treated.

- Iron supplements
- Treatments to reduce heavy menstrual bleeding
- Intravenous (IV) iron
- Treatments for underlying diseases that may be contributing to the anemia
- Blood transfusions
- Changing to an iron-rich diet

Worried your teen may be anemic?

If you notice any of your teen’s symptoms, talk to your teen’s healthcare provider. Other tests and evaluations may also be needed to find out why they have low iron.