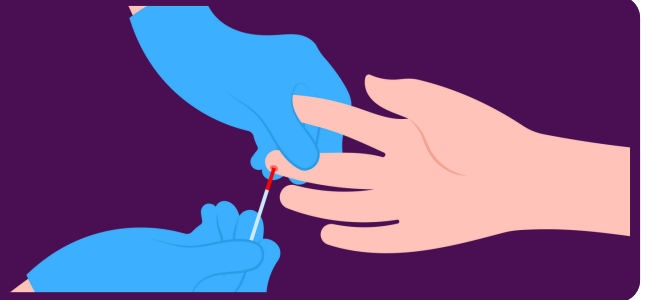# Low hemoglobin

WIC does a blood test to check the hemoglobin level in your blood. Hemoglobin is a protein that contains iron. It carries oxygen through your body, gives you energy, and helps fight infection. **A low hemoglobin level may mean your iron level is low too.**

Low amounts of iron in your blood can put you at risk for a health condition called iron-deficiency anemia. Iron-deficiency anemia can cause your heart to work harder to get oxygen to your organs. It can also cause you to have your baby too soon (a premature baby) or cause your baby to be small at birth. Children who have iron-deficiency anemia may have growth problems or a hard time learning.

What causes low hemoglobin or low iron?

- When you lose blood during your period (menstrual bleeding).
- Your baby's iron can be low if your iron is low during pregnancy.
- When your body grows quickly (like during pregnancy or when children are young).
- If you get more calcium than your body needs. Calcium helps you have strong bones, but too much can make it so your body doesn't use all the iron from the food you eat.
- If you get too much caffeine. Too much caffeine can make it so your body doesn't use all the iron from the food you eat.

How do I know if my iron is low?

Talk to your doctor if WIC says your hemoglobin levels are low. **A low hemoglobin level may mean your iron level is low too.** Your doctor can do a different blood test to check if your iron levels are low too.

Sometimes your body shows signs you have low iron. Talk to your doctor if you or your child:

- Feel tired or weak.
- Get sick more often than you used to.
- Feel dizzy or lightheaded.
- Notice your skin looks pale or the color looks different than it used to.
- Feel upset or mad more than normal.

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Eat foods high in iron at every meal.

Foods with the most iron:
- Beef, clams, lamb, liver, shrimp
- WIC cereals or other iron-fortified* cereals with at least 45% iron per serving

Other good sources of iron:
- Chicken, pork, turkey, and fish
- Beans, peas, and lentils
- Iron-fortified* breads and pastas
- Tofu, nuts, and spinach

Women who are pregnant need to be careful about the food they eat. Women who are pregnant are more likely to get sick from certain foods than other people. Eat meat, poultry, eggs, and fish only if they are fully cooked.

Ask your doctor if you need to take a vitamin or iron supplement.
Pregnant women should take a prenatal or multivitamin every day unless a doctor tells you not to.

Some foods affect how your body uses iron.

Try to eat foods high in vitamin C when you eat foods high in iron. This helps your body absorb and use more iron from food. These foods are good sources of vitamin C:
- Fruit like berries, kiwis, mangos, melons, oranges, papaya, and tangerines
- Vegetables like bell peppers, broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, tomatoes, spinach, and potatoes

Eat the right amount of dairy foods. Calcium helps you make strong bones, but too much can make it so your body doesn't use all the iron from the foods you eat.
- Eat dairy foods 1 to 2 hours after you eat foods with iron.
- Take vitamins with water instead of milk.

How much milk do I need?
- Children only need 16 ounces (2 cups) of dairy each day.
- Adults only need 24 ounces (3 cups) of dairy each day.

Don't drink coffee or tea when you eat foods high in iron.
Compounds in coffee and some teas (tannins and polyphenols) can stop your body from using iron in food.
- Change when you drink your coffee or tea if you have low iron. Drink them between meals to help your body use iron from the foods you eat (instead of during meals).
- Keep the amount of coffee or tea you drink to 1 to 2 cups each day if you have low iron.

*Iron-fortified foods have iron added to them.