

I'm so *tired!*

Could low iron levels be the answer to your problem? ANGIE TOMLINSON reports.

Iron deficiency is one of the most common nutrient deficiencies in Australia, affecting one in three women of child-bearing age.

It can be caused by an inadequate diet, during times of increased need such as pregnancy, and because some people have an inability to absorb iron. But the highest loss of iron in the body according to AMA (WA) GP spokesman Dr Simon Torvaldsen is blood loss, which is why young women are most at risk of low iron levels.

Iron is a vital component of haemoglobin, the substance in red blood cells that allows oxygen to be transported around the body. While the body stores iron, it can't make it, so it is important to include iron-rich foods in your diet, Dr Torvaldsen says.

Iron stores can get you through when dietary intake isn't enough. If requirements aren't met, stores deplete and it can lead to three stages.

STAGE ONE – Iron depletion

The first is iron depletion where, while your haemoglobin levels are normal and there are no obvious symptoms, your stores are low and will soon run out.

STAGE TWO – Iron deficiency

The iron depletion stage can then lead to iron deficiency where your stored and bloodborne iron stores are low and haemoglobin levels are below normal and symptoms, such as feeling tired can appear.

STAGE THREE – Iron deficiency anaemia

The next and most critical stage is iron deficiency anaemia where haemoglobin levels are so low the blood is unable to deliver enough oxygen to the cells.

Symptoms can include looking pale, breathlessness, dizziness and fatigue, as well as reduced immune function, impaired growth and cognition.

The best source of iron is red meat, but for vegetarians good non-meat sources include eggs, iron-fortified cereals, spinach, chickpeas, kidney beans, and some nuts, says Dr Torvaldsen.

It's not just about the amount of iron in a food, but how much of that iron can be absorbed by the body.

In this regard, meat is the winner over plants.

Despite the preconceptions around men and their love of red meat, it's women that need it more. Women aged 19 and over require more than double (18mg) the amount of iron a day that men do (8mg). Teenage girls require marginally more (15mg) than boys (11mg).

The Australian Dietary Guidelines recommend having 65g a day of red meat or 130g every second day for iron and zinc. Dietitians Association of Australia spokeswoman Margaret Hays, an accredited practising dietitian at The Nutrition Specialists, says a good rule of thumb to ensure adequate iron is in the diet could be to eat red meat, chicken and fish twice a week each, and then a



vegetarian option.

“Young girls are really at risk (of being low in iron), they are starting their periods, (and) especially those with very heavy periods if they are not eating a well-balanced, iron-rich diet. A lot of girls around teenage years tend to go off meat in particular,” Ms Hays

says. “It’s not saying you can’t get the iron you need from the vegetarian diet, it just needs to be a well-planned diet.

“It’s not just a matter of taking the meat off your plate and being done with that.”

Ms Hays and Dr Torvaldsen are adamant people should not self diagnose.

“If you’re feeling fatigued and attribute it to low iron, you run the risk of missing a more sinister underlying issue,” Dr Torvaldsen says.

“For example, a low iron count in men or postmenopausal women could

be the result of a more serious cause of blood loss, such as stomach ulcers or bowel cancer.

“It’s also dangerous to take iron supplements without consulting your GP, as some people have too much iron in the blood (known as haemochromatosis) and adding extra iron can result in organ failure.

“The good news is that it is very easy for your GP to check your iron levels — all it takes is a simple blood test.

“Once serious causes have been eliminated, it is readily

treatable.”

'If you're feeling fatigued and attribute it to low iron, you run the risk of missing a more sinister underlying issue. For example, a low iron count in men or postmenopausal women could be the result of a more serious cause of blood loss, such as stomach ulcers or bowel cancer.'

Dr Simon Torvaldsen

DID YOU KNOW

A cup of tea with your meal inhibits the absorption of iron? Avoid drinking tea one hour before or after your meal.

WORKING FOR IT

According to Meat and Livestock Australia, 170g of tofu has more iron than 100g of grilled and trimmed beef rump steak. But the big difference lies in the amount of iron that can be absorbed – 0.2mg for the tofu, and 0.68mg for the steak. You get more iron out of 100g of canned tuna in brine than half a cup of English spinach. It means vegetarians have to work a lot harder, and smarter, for adequate iron intake.

ARE YOU AT HIGH RISK?

Susceptible groups include menstruating women, pregnant and lactating women, babies and toddlers, teenage girls and female athletes.

MAXIMISE YOUR

ABSORPTION

Combine vitamin C-rich foods such as oranges, strawberries and tomatoes with iron-rich foods such as beef or lamb to maximise iron absorption. Vitamin C is also useful in improving iron absorption from plant-based foods such as breakfast cereal, legumes, nuts and dark leafy greens.

