



Why are people with chronic heart failure at risk of iron deficiency?

If you have been diagnosed with chronic heart failure, you may find yourself feeling exhausted day after day. You may get out of breath more easily and not be able to do the same amount of physical activity that you used to. These symptoms may in part be due to iron deficiency.

Heart failure is when your heart is damaged or weakened and cannot pump enough blood around your body. This means that your tissues and organs may not get all the oxygen and nutrients that they need. Heart failure can develop from various heart problems such as coronary artery disease, high blood pressure, heart valve defects and other factors such as alcohol misuse or viral infection.¹ There are around 6.5 million people with chronic heart failure in Europe and around 5 million in the USA.² Your risks of having heart failure increase with age, and in particular go up when you are more than 75 years old.^{2,3}

About 50% of heart failure patients have some form of iron deficiency, with and without anaemia.^{4,5} If you are suffering from chronic heart failure, there are many reasons why you may also be iron deficient.

- You may be absorbing less iron from your food into your bloodstream as your gut may be inflamed.⁶
- You may not have enough iron in your diet.⁷
- Drug interactions may reduce the amount of iron you absorb.⁸
- Medications may also be causing internal bleeding which means that more iron is lost from your body than normal.⁸

If you have chronic heart failure, it is important for your doctor to check for iron deficiency since studies have shown that iron deficiency in heart failure patients is associated with reduced physical function,⁹ impaired quality of life,¹⁰ as well as with a reduced chance of survival.⁶ Treating iron deficiency can improve your general sense of well-being and improve any of the related symptoms,¹¹ that you might be experiencing, such as fatigue, shortness of breath or a racing heart.^{6,12}

Warning signs of iron deficiency with chronic heart failure

There are many warning signs that may indicate that you have iron deficiency or iron deficiency anaemia. These include:

- Looking pale.¹³
- Shortness of breath and a racing heart.¹²
- Sore tongue or dry mouth.^{14,15}
- Cracks at the corners of your mouth.¹⁶
- Mouth ulcers.¹⁷
- Cold intolerance or cold hands and feet.¹⁸
- Craving to eat non-food items (pica/ pagophagia).^{19,20}
- Restless leg syndrome (RLS).^{21,22}
- Hair loss.²³
- Brittle,²⁴ or spoon-shaped nails.²⁴
- Headache.²⁵
- Increased susceptibility to infections.²⁶
- Dizziness,²⁷ irritability,²⁸ and loss of concentration.²⁹

Fatigue is also one of the main symptoms of iron deficiency. Fatigue is a more extreme version of tiredness, that some people may call exhaustion. If you are experiencing fatigue, you may feel physically and mentally exhausted and lack energy for a number of days each week, even if you have not been doing any particularly tiring physical activities.³⁰ You may be too exhausted to complete normal daily tasks such as getting dressed or going shopping, and you may often feel too tired to spend time with friends or family. Fatigue, shortness of breath, and a racing heart,³ are symptoms of both chronic heart failure and iron deficiency. It is therefore important that you discuss all of your symptoms with your doctor to find out what is causing your symptoms and what the best way to treat them might be.

Talking with your doctor

It is likely that if you have been diagnosed with chronic heart failure that you will have regular follow ups with your doctor to check how you are feeling and to monitor the progress of your symptoms. If you have been feeling fatigued or have any of the symptoms of iron deficiency such as shortness of breath and a racing heart, paleness or faintness, you may want to make an extra appointment or speak to your doctor about your symptoms at your next scheduled visit. To get the most out of your visit, think in advance about the information that the doctor might need in order to work out what is causing your symptoms. You should also prepare any questions that you want to ask.

If it turns out that you have iron deficiency, your doctor will be able to recommend the best treatment option for you. This could be a simple change in your diet to include more iron-rich foods, over-the-counter iron supplements, or a prescription of oral or intravenous iron.



Use our Symptom Browser to see the complete list of symptoms that iron deficiency can cause and to understand what each of these symptoms involves.

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