

# Haemoglobin and iron



Medical fact file  
Information for donors

# Haemoglobin and iron

Thank you for offering to give blood or platelets today. We are sorry you could not donate this time. Please don't think we don't want you to be able to donate. Far from it. We just want you to stay well and come back another day.

To help to keep your haemoglobin levels up, we hope you'll find the following information helpful.

## Your haemoglobin check

Every time you come to give blood or platelets we check your haemoglobin level. Haemoglobin, or 'Hb', is a protein found in the red blood cells that carries oxygen around your body and gives blood its red colour.

Haemoglobin levels vary from person to person. Men usually have higher levels than women. We set a fairly high 'cut-off' level because we want to be sure that your haemoglobin will not drop below normal



after you have donated. If you donate platelets you lose a certain number of red cells each time, and after a number of donations your iron stores and Hb can drop.

## **Why might haemoglobin levels be too low to donate?**

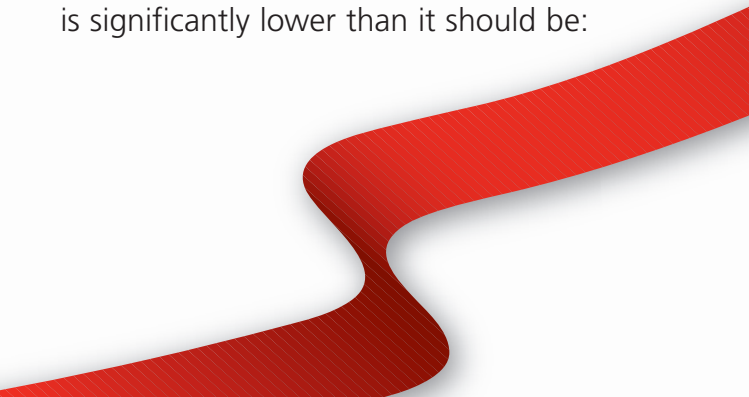
There are three main reasons:

- Variation between people – some of us just normally have a ‘low-ish’ level. This is not due to any health problem.
- Iron – we all need iron to make haemoglobin. If your iron stores are low, the haemoglobin may fall below normal (or below the donation level).
- Testing procedure – while we take great care with our test on the session, occasionally it underestimates the amount of haemoglobin in the blood.

## **What happens next?**

If the check indicates that your haemoglobin is only ‘low-ish’, no treatment is necessary. Our staff will discuss this with you, and tell you when you can next give blood or platelets.

If the check indicates that your haemoglobin is significantly lower than it should be:



- We will take a more detailed look at your blood sample back at our laboratory.
- We will then write giving you further advice and let you know when you will be invited to give blood again.
- If you do not receive a letter within two weeks, please call us on 0300 123 23 23, saying you have an 'iron query'. You can also use minicom 0845 7 300106 or talktype.

### **At your next donation**

We want you to come back as soon as possible, but your health comes first. So it's always best to wait a while to allow your haemoglobin to reach a higher level. We hope that next time you come to give blood your haemoglobin will be above our



'cut-off' level and that you will not be disappointed again.

### **More about iron**

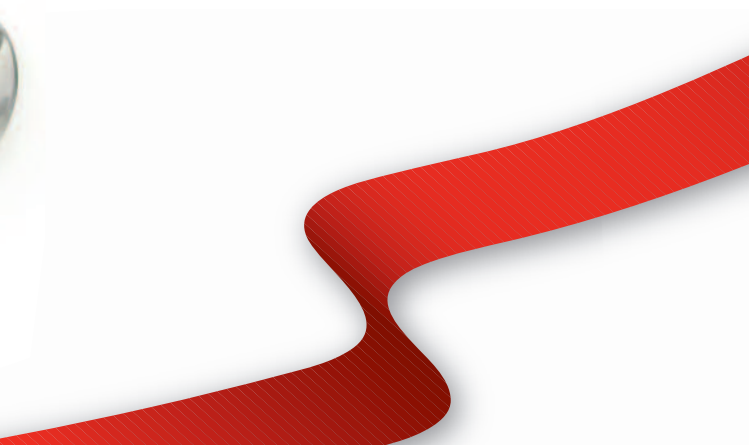
Iron is very important because it helps your body to make haemoglobin. You give away a lot of iron when you donate blood, and so it is even more important for blood donors to eat plenty of iron-containing foods.

### **Where does iron come from?**

As iron is found in a variety of foods, you can usually get enough from a balanced diet. In the UK the major sources of iron are meat and meat-based foods; cereals and cereal products; and vegetables.

### **What can I do to boost my iron levels?**

As iron is not easily absorbed by the body we all need a regular supply of it. Try to eat a well-balanced diet. Also, every day, try to eat three portions of food that are good sources of iron. Reducing the amount of snacks and sugary foods which contain very little iron will also help.



These foods are good sources of iron:

- Lean red meat, turkey and chicken
- Fish – including frozen and canned fish such as mackerel, sardines, salmon and pilchards
- Eggs
- Breakfast cereals – some cereals are fortified with iron
- Pulses and beans – in particular canned baked beans, chickpeas and lentils
- Nuts (including peanut butter)
- Brown rice
- Tofu
- Bread – especially wholemeal or brown breads
- Leafy green vegetables – especially curly kale, watercress, broccoli and spinach
- Dried fruit – in particular apricots, raisins and prunes



The amount of animal fat in your diet should be kept low. So when eating meat, try to choose lean meat. It is also best to grill, steam, roast or microwave food rather than fry it.

## **Vitamin C**

Vitamin C (sometimes called ascorbic acid) helps you to absorb more iron. So to get the most from the food you eat, have vitamin C rich foods with meals: for example fresh fruits and vegetables or drinks such as fresh orange juice.

A note about tea! Tea may reduce the absorption of iron from foods. Avoid drinking tea just before, after or with meals.

## **What if I am a vegetarian or vegan?**


Although iron from non-meat sources is more difficult for the body to absorb, people following a well balanced diet should be able to get enough iron in their diet.

## **Do I need to take iron tablets?**

Most people should be able to get all the iron they need by eating a varied and balanced diet and should not need to take iron supplements or tablets. Iron tablets should only be taken if your doctor has advised you to take them.

## **Additional source of information**

The Food Standards Agency:  
[www.eatwell.gov.uk](http://www.eatwell.gov.uk)



Our donor helpline is open for general enquiries 24 hours a day, every day of the year. If you have a non-urgent medical enquiry, please try to contact us between 9am and 5pm, Monday to Friday.



## **If you have given blood and become unwell**

If you have given blood and you become unwell (except for a cold or coldsore) in the two weeks following your donation, ring our donor helpline as soon as possible on 0300 123 23 23.

The National Blood Service is part of NHS Blood and Transplant, a Special Health Authority within the NHS.

**[www.blood.co.uk](http://www.blood.co.uk)**