

MIGRAINE HEADACHES and Iron Deficiency (the Often Overlooked Cause)

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Iron deficiency and iron deficiency anemia can present with a wide range of signs and symptoms, including:

- Fatigue
- Shortness of breath
- Weakness
- Restless leg syndrome
- Brittle nails
- Pale skin
- Sore tongue

However, headaches, including migraine headaches, are one of the lesser-known symptoms of iron deficiency.

Roughly 39 million people in the United States and 1 billion people worldwide have migraines. This makes migraine the third most common illness in the world. (1)

Women are more susceptible to iron deficiency headaches than men. This is because during regular menstruation, women in their childbearing years lose blood. When they lose blood, they lose iron.

Other common causes of iron deficiency are:

- Not eating enough iron-rich foods such as spinach, broccoli, almonds, pumpkin seeds, raisins, eggs, red meat, peanut butter, and iron-fortified foods including breads and cereals

- Increased need for iron, such as pregnancy and breastfeeding
- Impaired iron absorption due to intestinal or digestive disorders
- Blood loss due to injury, surgery, gastrointestinal and urinary tract bleeding

A study that appeared in the International Journal of Hematology Oncology and Stem Cell Research suggests an association between iron-deficiency anemia, hemoglobin and serum ferritin levels and the incidence of migraine in females. (2)

Many doctors are unaware that headaches are one of the lesser-known symptoms of iron deficiency, and as a result, they are prescribing unnecessary pain medications that can cause side effects instead of addressing the root cause. It is unfortunate that many people may be suffering needlessly because of ignorance about something so simple and inexpensive to treat.

This does not mean that all headaches are caused by iron deficiency, but certainly, iron deficiency should be considered.

A blood test to determine your body's iron stores is known as a ferritin test. A ferritin test measures the amount of ferritin in your blood. Ferritin is a blood protein that contains iron. A ferritin test helps your doctor understand how much iron your body stores. If a ferritin test reveals that your blood ferritin level is lower than normal, it indicates your body's iron stores are low and you have iron deficiency. As a result, you could be anemic. (3)

If you are suffering from headaches (including migraine headaches), ask your doctor about ordering a ferritin test to determine if you have iron deficiency.

Be aware that iron is a mineral that if taken in excess can be harmful. Therefore, a qualified healthcare professional should recommend supplement dosages.

References:

1. Migraine Facts. Migraine Research Foundation. Available at <https://migraineresearchfoundation.org/about-migraine/migraine-facts>. Accessed 2/26/2021.

2. Tayyebi A, Poursadeghfard M, Nazeri M, Poursadeghfard T. Is There Any Correlation between Migraine Attacks and Iron Deficiency Anemia? A Case-Control Study. Int J Hematol Oncol Stem Cell Res. 2019;13(3):164-171.
3. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/tests-procedures/ferritin-test/about/pac-20384928>.