Feeling Weak?

By: Alyssa Edwards

Recent studies have shown that iron deficiency is becoming a large problem in today’s American society. It is said that “15% of the world’s population” (Wollinsky 138) is affected by this type of mineral disorder. Although this figure may not seem very high, studies show that the percentage is increasing. Before extensive studies were popular in the medical world, doctors were not overly concerned about iron deficiency. Even today it is not considered a priority to find better cures or treatments because of the amount of cancers and other health problems moving to the forefront. These are legitimate reasons for its lack of attention, but those who have iron deficiency still live untreated. This type of mineral disorder does not typically start out as a serious medical issue, but it can end up becoming one—especially if the patient goes untreated or fails to make changes to their eating habits or daily iron intake. It is also the most common cause of anemia reported in the U.S. (Callen 1). Finding better treatments for iron deficiency should be made a higher priority, in addition to increased awareness about iron itself, symptoms of deficiency, treatments, and who is most at risk.

To fully understand the importance of iron deficiency awareness, the concept of iron and its effects on the human body must first be understood. If there is an insufficient amount of iron in the body the individual is reported to have an iron deficiency. Iron deficiency doesn’t just occur after one day of low iron intake, but over an extended period of time (Pynaert 1). In the human body, the mineral that is the most prevalent is iron (Driskell 100). In a recent study, the average amount of iron intake for healthy Americans is below the nation-wide recommendation (Pynaert 1). For the human body to perform important functions it needs the right amount of red blood cells, which are the most important blood cells in the body. Red blood cells contain hemoglobin, which is a protein chemical in the body. To obtain sufficient amounts of hemoglobin the body must have iron (The Human Heart). This makes iron an important element to sustaining a healthy immune system and lifestyle.

Apart from knowing about iron itself, it is also important to understand the physical, mental, and emotional effects that iron deficiency can have on the body. Although some may argue that iron deficiency is not harmful enough to invest research time and dollars, the seriousness of the symptoms prove otherwise. The most frequent physical symptoms are fatigue, lack of energy, and weakness (Driskell 102). With these types of physical effects, it is logical that mental effects would also be present. Some of these include lack of interest, shortened attention span, and a decrease in overall mental awareness. This is why being aware of the symptoms of iron deficiency is so important because it may be hard to differentiate between normal tiredness or fatigue due to the deficiency. Other physical symptoms include lack of body heat in cold
temperatures and the amount of work that can be done at a given time is less than a person without iron deficiency (102). A symptom of an iron disorder that is often overlooked is the effect on the body’s blood. Red blood cells are needed to sustain the system’s blood flow and two important functions: removing waste and carrying oxygen. Red blood cells are circulated throughout the body and when they deplete they eventually die out. If the human body is working correctly, they eventually replace themselves. However, if iron deficiency is present the body may take longer to replace the cells, therefore affecting the functions of the body (The Human Heart).

The symptoms of iron deficiency range from minor to very serious. However, with the right treatments iron deficiency can become a little less frightening. The most obvious treatment for increasing iron intake is through food and supplements. Iron supplements can be prescribed by your doctor and taken regularly. However, iron supplements can cause iron poisoning; that is too much iron is taken in by the body, thereby hindering it from absorbing other minerals and nutrients such as zinc, Vitamin E, and copper. It is also mentioned that too much iron can lead to colon cancer (Driskell 102-103). Another treatment used is increasing iron-filled foods. These include more red meat, fish, and green vegetables (Pynaert 1). Whole grain cereals and breads and dried fruits are also encouraged (Driskell 101). These treatments combined would benefit the patient with the disorder greatly, but there is still that risk of too much iron. It is recommended that those with iron deficiencies visit a Registered Dietitian to receive health suggestions about their diet (Wollinsky 151). With these being the only three treatments for this mineral disorder, it is easy to see why it is so important to do more research to find better, more efficient treatments.

It would be easy to prescribe iron supplements to the person with iron deficiency and tell them to live life normally, but with the extensive risks of using supplements, it hard to determine whether they would help or hurt the patient more. Although having iron deficiency is a disorder in which the person can still go about their daily life, the physical and mental affects could eventually add up making daily life more difficult and unenjoyable; this isn’t how people should have to live. The physical and mental effects could eventually lead to emotional ones, which could hurt the social aspects of their lives and even the people they love.

The lack of treatments for and preventions of iron deficiency has caused an assortment of problems with different people depending on their situations in life. Since a side-effect of iron deficiency is weakness and fatigue, it is easy to see how athletes are more likely to develop or be affected by iron-deficiency sometime in their lives. The amount of hemoglobin in the body determines the amount of energy in the body and if the hemoglobin level is low the energy level is subsequently low (Wollinsky 145). Athletes take pride in their sport whether it is running, playing baseball, or swimming. They are all about speed and endurance. If athletes develop iron deficiency and there is no definite way to treat it, how will they win that next race or advance to the next level? Even those who are not athletes but who are normally active on a daily basis are at
risk for developing iron deficiency. One might argue that helping athletes with iron deficiency is near impossible because their bodies require more blood and oxygen, but it is not fair to take them out of perspective. Many people in today’s society are doing their best to stay active on a regular basis which is a habit that should be encouraged. Another minor group of people who have a risk of developing iron deficiency is vegetarians. As discussed earlier, iron filled foods such as meat and fish are what contribute to sufficient amounts of iron (Wollinsky 139,151). Vegetarians usually avoid these specific types of food therefore putting them at a higher risk for getting iron deficiency.

Apart from athletes and vegetarians, iron deficiency affects up to 3.3 women in the United States who are pregnant. They may experience an early delivery or delay in physical or mental development after birth. There is also the possibility of low birth weight in children whose mothers are iron deficient (Callen 1). In pregnancy it is important to be healthy and avoid taking medications that could affect the baby. It would be a risk for a pregnant woman to take iron supplements, but also a risk for her not to. Women who are pregnant should concentrate on eating the right amounts of iron-filled foods. When a woman turns nineteen she should consume at least ten milligrams of iron a day and when a woman becomes pregnant she should increase her iron intake to fifteen milligrams (Wollinsky 151). On the other hand, a positive aspect of having iron deficiency is that there is no research showing that it can be passed along from mother to child. Iron deficiency isn’t hereditary but is developed because of the bodies’ need for iron and the amount or lack of daily iron intake (Driskell 101).

One might argue that because iron deficiency has become so “popular” in society, it isn’t worth worry about. However, it is scientifically and medically proven to lead to more harmful effects later in life. They then may argue that those just happen later in life and everyone has health problems when they get older. However, by the time “later” happens it will be too late to do anything about it; and the side effects will have already been taking place. Why not do something about it now? With technology in the field of medicine developing so rapidly today it makes the most sense to start finding solutions now than to wait until it has affected more people. Although there are not many diseases or disorders that can be fully cured, the solutions offered are meant to help the individuals with the health problem. Iron deficiency only has treatments that have other risks attached to them that may do more damage than help. There is also a lack of updated research on the disorder. All of these factors contribute to the need to make iron deficiency a priority in the field of medicine.

Works Cited

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