



Low haemoglobin and iron

General information about haemoglobin and iron in your diet

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

Your haemoglobin check

Every time you come to give blood, platelets, or plasma we check your haemoglobin level. Haemoglobin 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. A minimum level of haemoglobin is set in law to protect you, to make sure that your haemoglobin does not drop below normal after you have donated.

If you donate blood, platelets or plasma, you lose a certain number of red cells each time, and after several donations your iron stores and haemoglobin can drop. To ensure your safety we need your haemoglobin to be at least 125g/l for women and 135g/l for men before donating blood and platelets. For plasma only donation the haemoglobin levels must be at least 120g/l for women and 130g/l for men.

What happens if my haemoglobin is low on session?

You will be given your haemoglobin result and informed when you can return to donate. You may be asked to visit your GP, and/or our Clinical Support Team may contact you.

If your haemoglobin is retested by your GP, you may see a "normal" result that differs from the result we gave you when you came to donate. This can sometimes happen. If the result shows that you have a sufficient haemoglobin level to meet our donation criteria, please call our donor helpline on 0300 123 23 23 to inform us of your haemoglobin result.

Why might haemoglobin levels be too low to donate?

There are three common reasons:

- Variation between people – some of us just normally have a lower level.
- Iron – we all need iron to make haemoglobin. If your iron stores are low, your haemoglobin levels may fall below the required level for donation.
- Testing procedure – while we take great care with our test on the session, occasionally it underestimates the amount of haemoglobin in the blood.

At your next donation

You will have been asked to leave at least three months before your next donation 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 minimum required level for donation and that you will not be disappointed again.

If you are unable to donate for this reason on three consecutive occasions then, to protect and maintain your health, safety and wellbeing, we will advise that you should not donate again. Sometimes an extended break from donating is all that is needed. Please wait for at least 18 months before contacting us to discuss donating again.

More about iron

Iron is very important because it helps your body to make haemoglobin and you give away a lot of iron when you donate blood. 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 vegetables.

What can I do to boost my iron levels?

Try to eat a well-balanced diet. Although iron from non-meat sources is more difficult for the body to absorb, people following a well-balanced vegetarian or vegan diet should get enough iron in their diet. Every day try to eat three portions of food that are good sources of iron, as follows:

- Lean red meat, turkey, and chicken
- Fish – including mackerel, sardines, salmon, pilchards, and shellfish
- Eggs
- Breakfast cereals – some cereals are fortified with iron
- Pulses and beans – 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 – apricots, raisins, and prunes

Vitamin C

Vitamin C 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.

Avoid drinking tea just before, after or with meals as this may reduce the absorption of iron from foods.

