Anemia (Iron Deficiency)

Iron deficiency anemia is a common type of anemia (a condition in which blood lacks adequate healthy red blood cells) and can be a signal of blood loss through the intestines or of colon cancer.

Red blood cells carry oxygen to the body's tissues. As the name implies, iron deficiency anemia is due to insufficient iron. Without enough iron, your body can't produce enough hemoglobin, a substance in red blood cells that enables them to carry oxygen. As a result, iron deficiency anemia may leave you tired and short of breath.

Symptoms

Initially, iron deficiency anemia can be so mild that it goes unnoticed. But as the body becomes more deficient in iron and anemia worsens, the signs and symptoms intensify.

Iron deficiency anemia symptoms may include:
- Extreme fatigue
- Pale skin
- Weakness
- Shortness of breath
- Headache
- Dizziness or lightheadedness
- Cold hands and feet
- Irritability
- Inflammation or soreness of your tongue
- Brittle nails
- Fast heartbeat
- Unusual cravings for non-nutritive substances, such as ice, dirt or starch
- Poor appetite, especially in infants and children with iron deficiency anemia
- An uncomfortable tingling or crawling feeling in your legs (restless legs syndrome)

Treatment

If you suffer from iron deficiency, your physician may recommend starting an oral iron preparation. Oral iron can often cause significant constipation. For patients who are unable to tolerate oral iron preparations, intravenous infusion of iron is available, as this does not cause constipation.

Sometimes, additional treatments for iron deficiency anemia are necessary, especially if you're bleeding internally.

Why have I been asked to see a Gastroenterologist?

Your primary care physician will likely be the first person to recognize iron deficiency anemia on blood tests and will likely refer you to a gastroenterologist for consultation. This consultation is made in order to rule out colon cancer and internal bleeding as a cause of the iron deficiency anemia. A colonoscopy and upper endoscopy (EGD) are the tests of choice to rule out common sources of iron deficiency anemia in the gastrointestinal tract. If both of these studies do not reveal a source, the small intestine must be examined for tumors and angiodysplasias. Angiodysplasias are tiny areas where an artery and vein meet irregularly near the surface of the lining of the bowel wall, which can cause blood loss that is invisible and slow or brisk. This examination is done with small bowel video capsule endoscopy. If angiodysplasias are noted in the small bowel, a special procedure, small bowel balloon enteroscopy, may be recommended.