HOW CAN I TELL IF MY CHILD IS ANEMIC?

Iron deficiency anemia can cause the following problems in your child:

- Pale, gray or “ashy” skin (in addition, the lining of the eyelids and the nail beds may look less pink than normal.)
- Irritability
- Mild weakness
- Tiring easily

Children with severe cases may also have:

- Shortness of breath
- Rapid heart rate
- Swollen hands and feet

WHAT CAN CAUSE IT?

Rapid growth spurts (mostly in young children and teens) and imbalanced diets are the most common causes in children. Adolescent girls with heavy menstrual periods may also be diagnosed with IDA. Rare stomach or intestinal issues may also be the reason the body isn’t absorbing iron.

Poor diet is the most common reason that children under age four have IDA, and it is usually associated with drinking too much cow’s milk (because it decreases the desire for other foods with greater iron content such as meat or iron-fortified cereal).

HOW IS IRON DEFICIENCY ANEMIA DIAGNOSED?

A blood test is the most common way, but other steps might include a physical examination, X-rays or referral to other doctors for specialized testing.

WHAT IS THE TREATMENT?

Treatment will vary based on factors including your child’s age, overall health and medical history, as well as the extent and cause of IDA.

If IDA is due to diet, your child’s doctor may recommend an iron-rich diet or iron supplements (pills or drops). Following are some important tips regarding iron supplements:

- Increase their absorption by giving them to your child in between meals and with vitamin C-rich juice, such as orange.
- If your child’s stomach becomes irritated, give supplements with food.
- Iron supplements may change the color of stool (black and tarry).
- If the pills or drops cause constipation, a stool softener or laxative may be needed.
- Keep iron tablets out of reach of younger siblings because too much iron can be dangerous.

Typically, supplements will help iron levels in the blood return to normal in a matter of weeks to months.

WHAT ARE FOODS RICH IN IRON?

- Meats: lean beef, pork, lamb, liver and other organ meats
- Poultry: chicken, duck, turkey—especially dark meat
- Fish: sardines, codfish, shellfish, anchovies
- Dark-green leafy vegetables such as kale, mustard greens, turnip greens, collards, broccoli
- Legumes, such as lima beans, green peas, dry beans and peas, canned baked beans
- Dried fruits such as prunes, apricots, raisins
- Potatoes with skin
- Seeds: sunflower, pumpkin, squash
- Egg yolks
- Yeast-leavened whole-wheat breads and bread products

You can also boost your child’s iron intake if you include beans, grains and fresh or frozen vegetables when serving meat or by finishing off meals with fresh fruit.

HOW DO I PREVENT ANEMIA?

Make sure your child is eating a well-balanced diet. For younger children, follow these suggestions:

- Do not give your baby cow’s milk until he or she is more than a year old, and limit it to no more than 32 ounces a day.
- If your child is breastfed, give him foods with added iron, such as cereal, when you begin feeding him solid foods.
- If you formula-feed your baby, give him formula with added iron.

For more information, visit rileyhospital.org.