

Dietary Guidelines for Hemochromatosis

What is hemochromatosis?

Hemochromatosis is a disorder of iron metabolism. People with hemochromatosis absorb more iron from their diet than people with normal iron absorption and may develop iron overload that may affect different organs if left untreated.

What causes hemochromatosis?

The most common form is hereditary and begins in midlife (around the ages of 30 to 50 in men, and over the age of 50 in women), but it can also be seen in juveniles or neonates. Other types of hemochromatosis or iron overload can be caused by anemia and alcoholism as well as other disorders.

What problems can result from hemochromatosis?

Excess iron is stored in the liver, heart, and pancreas. If left untreated, organ failure may occur.

What are the dietary guidelines for people with hemochromatosis?

- **Reduce consumption of red meat** – Red meat contains mostly heme iron, which is the most easily absorbed form of iron.
- **Include coffee, tea, and/or red wine with your meals when possible** - These beverages contain tannins, which inhibit the absorption of iron. In addition, consuming eggs, fiber, or supplemental calcium can impair the absorption of iron.
- **Avoid excessive consumption of sugary foods and beverages** - Sugar increases iron absorption. This includes sodas and added sweeteners, such as honey and molasses.
- **Avoid iron supplements and multivitamins that contain iron**--Be sure to read the label or check with your pharmacist and/ or nutritionist regarding which vitamin supplement is best for you.
- **Avoid vitamin C supplements** - Vitamin C increases iron absorption. However, whole fruits and vegetables that contain vitamin C generally do not contain enough vitamin C to increase iron absorption if eaten in moderation. Do NOT avoid these healthy foods!
- **Avoid raw or undercooked shellfish** - Shellfish contain the bacterium *Vibrio vulnificus*, which can be fatal to people with liver disease caused by high iron levels. People with hemochromatosis are also more susceptible to blood stream infections.

- **Do not avoid fruits, vegetables, nuts, grains, rice, and beans** – These foods do contain iron, but mostly in non-heme form, which is more difficult to absorb than heme iron. The health benefits far outweigh any iron you will consume from them.
- **If you have liver damage, it is important to avoid alcohol** – Alcohol intake can worsen liver damage.
- **Avoid cooking in cast iron pots and pans** – Iron from this kind of cookware can leach into foods.

People with hemochromatosis do not need to be extreme in their diet restrictions. Dietary interventions alone cannot treat hemochromatosis, but in addition to medical treatment, can help avoid the complications of iron overload.

For more information:

- <http://digestive.niddk.nih.gov/ddiseases/pubs/hemochromatosis/index.htm>
- <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/hemochromatosis/DS00455/>