Discovering the Link Between Anemia and Depression

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Anemia and Depression

Is there a connection between depression and anemia? Some studies suggest there might be.

In order to understand why there might be a link between these two disorders, we must first understand what constitutes both anemia and depression.

What Is Anemia?

Anemia is a condition marked by a lack of healthy red blood cells, meaning there are not enough red blood cells carrying adequate oxygen to the body's tissues. As a result, anemia often results in feelings of weakness and tiredness.

The Causes and Types of Anemia

There are different forms of anemia, some temporary and some long-term, and each form has its own cause. Many types of anemia may be preventable by maintaining a healthy, well-balanced and varied diet.

Iron Deficiency Anemia

This is one of the more common forms of anemia; with iron deficiency anemia, blood lacks adequate healthy red blood cells, resulting in a lack of oxygen carried to the body's tissues. Iron deficiency anemia is caused by very low (insufficient) levels of iron in the body.

With a shortage of iron, your body is not able to produce enough hemoglobin within your red blood cells, which is the substance that allows those blood cells to carry oxygen to the rest of your body.

Symptoms of iron deficiency anemia include:

- Extreme fatigue
- Paleness
- Weakness
- Chest pains
- Dizziness or lightheadedness
- Fast heart rate
- Shortness of breath
- Headaches
- Brittle nails
- Cold hands and feet
- Poor appetite (especially in infants/children)

- Inflammation/Soreness of your tongue
- Unusual cravings for non-nutritive substances (i.e. ice, dirt, starch)

Iron deficiency anemia can often be managed by taking iron supplements, but other treatments are also available, if necessary.

Vitamin Deficiency Anemia

As the name implies, vitamin deficiency anemia is caused by vitamin deficiency, leading to a lack of healthy red blood cells. The vitamins most often linked to anemia are folate, vitamin B-12 and vitamin C.

Vitamin deficiencies can occur in two ways: either you are not eating enough foods that contain folate, vitamin B-12 and vitamin C, or your body is having trouble absorbing these vitamins from your food.

Symptoms of vitamin deficiency anemia include:

- Fatigue
- Dizziness
- Pale/yellow skin
- Irregular heartbeat
- Shortness of breath
- Muscle weakness
- Unsteadiness
- Weight loss
- Numbness/tingling in hands and feet
- Confusion/forgetfulness
- Personality changes

Vitamin deficiency anemia can often be treated with vitamin supplements and changes to your diet that will lead to more vitamins becoming absorbed by your body.

Aplastic Anemia

With aplastic anemia, your body stops producing enough new blood cells, causing a higher risk of infections and uncontrolled bleeding. Aplastic anemia is serious, but rare, and can develop at any age.

Symptoms of aplastic anemia include:

- Fatigue
- Rapid/irregular heartbeat
- Shortness of breath (with exertion)
- Dizziness
- Headaches
- Paleness
- Frequent/prolonged infections
- Prolonged bleeding from cuts/wounds
- Nosebleeds and bleeding gums
- Unexplained/easy bruising
- Skin rashes

Aplastic anemia can have a slow onset or may come on suddenly, and it can be short-lived or chronic. Treatments include medication, blood transfusions or stem cell transplants.

Sickle Cell Anemia

Unlike most forms of anemia, sickle cell anemia is inherited. If you have sickle cell anemia, you do not have enough healthy red blood cells to carry oxygen throughout your body, and the red blood cells you do have become rigid and sticky.

Moreover, red blood cells can be shaped like sickles or crescent moons, causing them to get stuck in small blood vessels, which can slow or block blood flow and oxygen to various parts of the body.

Although there is no cure, there are treatments available for sickle cell anemia that can relieve pain and prevent other issues associated with the disease.

Thalassemia

Just like sickle cell anemia, thalassemia is an inherited disorder, marked by fewer red blood cells and less hemoglobin in your body than what is considered normal. Due to these symptoms, thalassemia may cause anemia.

Mild thalassemia may not need any treatment, but severe forms may require regular blood transfusions. As with most forms of anemia, a healthy diet and regular exercise may help manage symptoms.

How Is Anemia Connected to Depression?

In a study published in Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica, Volume 134, Issue 2, H. Vulser et al. discovered that depressed participants were significantly more likely to have anemia, as compared to non-depressed participants. Further, this study showed that the likelihood of patients having anemia increased with the severity of their depression.

This study has proven that there is definitely an association between depression and anemia, although further studies are needed in order to understand the relationship between these two disorders and what underlies the connection between them.

Talk to Your Doctor About Anemia

Do you have depression and find that you are experiencing any of the symptoms connected to anemia? Do you have any form of anemia in your family history?

As there is an association between depression and anemia, it is worth speaking to your doctor to find out more about your condition.

Feelings of extreme fatigue can be symptoms of both anemia and depression, but it is important to understand the underlying cause of your symptoms. If your fatigue is caused by anemia, the treatments for depression will not improve your symptoms.

Develop Healthy Eating Habits

Although anemia cannot be prevented, you may be able to avoid developing iron deficiency anemia or vitamin deficiency anemia by eating a healthy, well-balanced diet.

Ensure that you are getting all of the vitamins and nutrients your body needs in order to produce enough red blood cells and hemoglobin to provide oxygen to the rest of your body.

If your depression causes you to overeat, developing a healthy diet plan may also ease the symptoms of your depression. It is always beneficial to take care of your body and what you are putting into it, as your physical health has an impact on your overall mental health.

Your doctor will be able to provide you with a plan to either treat or prevent anemia, simply through the foods that

you eat.