

What is hemochromatosis?

Hemochromatosis causes your body to absorb too much iron from the food you eat. The iron builds up in your liver, pancreas, and heart, and it can be poisonous.

What causes hemochromatosis?

Primary hemochromatosis is hereditary and is caused by genetic defects. Secondary hemochromatosis can develop in people who have anemia and require frequent blood transfusions. Sometimes other liver diseases can cause mild iron overload as well.

What problems can result from hemochromatosis?

Excess iron is stored in the liver, heart, and pancreas. Complications include cirrhosis, diabetes, irregular heart rhythm, arthritis, and erectile dysfunction. If left untreated, organ failure may occur. However, not everyone has symptoms or complications.

How should I change my diet?

People with hemochromatosis do not need to be extreme in their diet restrictions. It is important to understand that diet alone cannot treat hemochromatosis. But, along with medical treatment, dietary changes can help you avoid the complications of iron overload.

There are several steps you can take to decrease the amount of iron in your diet, which in turn reduces the iron that is stored in your organs. Here are 10 tips.

1. Avoid iron supplements and multivitamins that contain iron. Be sure to read the label or check with your pharmacist and/or Registered Dietitian regarding which vitamin supplement is best for you.
2. Avoid vitamin C supplements and orange juice with meals. 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!
3. Drink coffee and tea with your meals. These beverages contain tannins, which reduce the amount of iron you will absorb.
4. Enjoy eggs, fiber, and/or a calcium supplement at mealtimes. All of these decrease iron absorption.
5. Avoid sugary foods and drinks. Added sugar increases iron absorption and has no nutritional value. Especially avoid blackstrap molasses, which is a rich source of iron.
6. Eat less red meat. Red meat contains mostly heme iron, which is the most easily absorbed form of iron. Organ meat is very rich in easily absorbed heme iron and should be avoided.

7. Avoid raw shellfish such as oysters. People with hemochromatosis are more vulnerable to infections caused by bacteria that are present in raw shellfish.
8. Eat plenty of fruits, vegetables, nuts, grains, rice, and beans! These healthy foods contain non-heme iron, which is more difficult to absorb than heme iron. Plus, many of these foods contain oxalates, which actually inhibit iron absorption.
9. If you have liver damage, it is important to avoid alcohol. Alcohol intake can worsen liver damage. Even people without liver damage should drink in moderation: 1 drink per day for women, 2 for men.
10. Avoid cooking in cast iron pots and pans. The iron leaches into food.

For more information:

<http://digestive.niddk.nih.gov/ddiseases/pubs/hemochromatosis/index.htm>

<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/hemochromatosis/DS00455/>

<http://www.irondisorders.org>