Are You Getting Enough Iron?

Did you know that at least one in five women in Singapore suffer from iron deficiency anaemia (IDA) at the time of delivery? How does this affect both mum and baby?

WORDS MELISSA ESPECKERMAN

As we all know, along with the joys that pregnancy brings, it is also pretty often accompanied by its own set of challenges and sometimes complications. Sure, we expect the usual bout of morning sickness, the backaches, the leg cramps or even heartburn but did you know that at least one in five women right here in Singapore suffer from iron deficiency anaemia at the time of delivery.

If you’re wondering what anaemia is, it’s a deficiency of red blood cells. There are different types of anaemia but the most common during pregnancy is iron deficiency anaemia.

Yes it happens. “Anaemia in pregnancy is not uncommon and iron-deficiency anaemia is the leading cause of anaemia in pregnancy. The iron requirements in pregnancy increase about two to three fold,” says Dr Shakina Rauff, associate consultant from the NUH Women’s Centre at National University Hospital.

So what is iron exactly and why is it so important? Iron is essential for making haemoglobin, which carries oxygen throughout the body. And if you’re pregnant it carries oxygen to the placenta as well. Because of the increase in blood volume, once you’re pregnant, your need for iron increases dramatically, especially in the last two trimesters. The extra iron goes to your growing baby and placenta.

Some have it worse than others. Women who have an inadequate diet, heavy menses, multiple pregnancies or if they have many pregnancies that are occur very close together may very likely be anaemic and pregnancy will only worsen this state.
The Effects

While it’s safe to say that iron deficiency anaemia is pretty common in Singapore, unfortunately not many understand the implications of the condition on both mother and baby. "Moderate to severe IDA may affect the normal growth of the foetus and increase the risk of preterm delivery, and cause the mother to be physically tired and less able to tolerate further blood loss. Mild IDA may be relatively symptom-free, though it would also put the mother at a lower baseline from which further blood loss at delivery may then require blood transfusion to top up the haemoglobin level," shares Dr Tony Tan, president of the Obstetrical and Gynaecological Society of Singapore.

But those aren’t the only effects of iron deficiency anaemia. It has also been known to affect the milk flow during lactation, wound healing, tiredness and postnatal depression post-delivery.

In Singapore, screening for anaemia is routinely done in the first trimester. This allows important measures to be taken if you’re found to be anaemic. However, while you may not be anaemic so early on in your pregnancy, the condition can develop later on in your pregnancy.

The UK National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) antenatal care guidelines recommend that all pregnant women also be screened for anaemia at 28 weeks when other blood screening tests are performed. This is when your need for iron greatly increases. Seeing as anaemia in pregnancy is highly due to iron deficiency, this all-important screening allows sufficient time for treatment.

How are Babies Affected?

Again, low levels of iron affect your growing baby more than you know. Evidence shows that infants whose mother was anaemic were at greater risk of also being deficient in iron. "Low iron levels in the mother also tend to reduce the iron levels in the foetus/child which may affect physical performance and development," says Dr Tan.

Dr Ryan Taylor, a consultant at the Department of Paediatrics, National University Hospital further stresses just how important iron is. "Consistent relationships between iron deficiency and poor performance have been reported in cognitive and behavioural tests. Infants deficient in iron have been shown to score lower on mental development (average 6–15 points lower) and motor development (average 6–17 points lower) test scores than infants with better iron status."

Dr Taylor goes on to say that gross motor development, motor co-ordination/sequencing and locomotor development have all been shown to be hindered by iron deficiency. Socio-emotional behaviour has also been found to be impaired, with iron deficient infants being more wary, hesitant, solemn and unhappy. It has also been found to have had a long lasting impact with iron administration later on in life showing no signs of reversal.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR?

Not quite sure what the symptoms are, here are some possible ones. If you think you might be anaemic, do make sure you consult your doctor for a proper diagnosis.

- Tiredness
- Dizziness
- Breathlessness
- Palpitations
- Faint
- Mood changes

Dr Rauff also adds that some signs would be a low blood pressure, increased heart rate and that the expectant mum may look very pale.

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