



NUTRITIONALLY SPEAKING

Too much iron or copper is dangerous

by George Meinig, DDS

DEAR DR. MEINIG: We hear a lot about people needing more iron and you have stated that many anemic people may need copper. Isn't there some danger to taking these? How can we tell if we need these minerals or if we are getting too much? L.N.

DEAR L.N.: More information is available on the problems of high copper levels than about iron. The "iron poor blood" sales pitch promoting the purchase of supplements, predominantly containing iron and copper, has resulted in many people taking too much of these metals.

Your question is an important one, as serious illnesses can result from the accumulation of these two metals. Furthermore, it is difficult to remove them from the body once they have become embedded in our tissues.

High copper levels are an important factor in hallucinatory and paranoid schizophrenia, hypertension, autism, stuttering, premenstrual tension, children's hyperactivity, preclampsia, depression, senility and insomnia. The overloading of iron causes abnormal accumulation in the liver, heart, lungs, and pancreas. Typical liver cirrhosis from excess iron storage is present in the disease called hemosiderosis. The Bantu tribe in South Africa are an outstanding example. These natives prepared beer and sour porridge, which are acids, in large iron pots. The acid leached out the iron so that those who drank large quantities of beer developed hemosiderosis and scurvy. The concentration of iron in tissues also destroys vitamin C causing the scurvy.

IRON BECOMES concentrated because the digestive tract cannot screen it out when it is not needed. There is a small daily excretion in the urine, feces, perspiration, and from menstruation, but this is easily replaced from lean meats, deep green leafy vegetables, legumes, whole grain cereals or bread, liver, organ meats, shell fish, and molasses. Symptoms of iron overloading are shortness of

breath, headache, increasing fatigue, dizziness, and loss of weight. When the tissues become saturated with iron, the skin takes on a gray hue.

Heredity sometimes plays a part, but high intake is more frequently the cause. One-a-day Vitamins Plus Iron, Geritol, Hadical, and Ironized Yeast, and the push for their use on TV, play a major role in iron buildup. Some red wines have large amounts, as do iron tonics. Multiple blood transfusions can also be a cause and some well waters may contain excessive amounts.

Iron deficiency anemia, if due to need for iron, will respond to its use with a steady increase of hemoglobin. If this does not take place, other causes such as a deficiency of pyridoxine (B6), zinc, or copper may be involved.

Copper, in small amounts, is essential to form hemoglobin. Although copper is an essential element, too much is also toxic. A common source of copper is its predominant use in home construction today: galvanized pipes often being replaced by copper. When city or well water is acid, copper is leached from the pipes, and adds a significant amount to our food and drink. Our Ojai water is acid, testing in my home this morning at a pH of 5.0. When copper and cadmium are quite high, they are strong emetics (produce vomiting). Such acid drinks as lemon and colas stored in soft drink machines, can cause serious nausea and vomiting in a small child, particularly to an early user after the machine has been idle overnight. The Navy had a problem on submarines during the war, when their soda fountain, used only once a week, dispensed acid raspberry flavors from cadmium plated containers.

COPPER IS high in smokers, and in women on the birth control pill. Five cases of myocardial infarction in women on the pill resulted in high heart levels of copper, and death for all five.

Food processing deprives foods of many nutrients. More than 20 key minerals and vitamins are ground and crushed out of wheat in processing it for cereals and flour. This prolongs shelf life of the food, but shortens human and animal life. Even freezing of fresh green vegetables finds them being blanched to produce a bright green color when cooked. This reduces zinc and manganese 20 percent and these two elements help control copper and iron levels.

Blood and hair testing are methods of determining iron status. Serum ferritin levels are particularly useful in testing for iron.

It should be kept in mind that a good diet usually provides adequate amounts of iron and copper. People who insist on the use of refined foods and then hope to receive normal quantities of these elements via supplementation, often succeed in overdosing. The benefit-risk relationship of over- or under-nutrition when taking copper and iron must be considered, if optimum health is our goal.

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