

TREATMENT

Iron-Deficiency Anemia

The severity and cause of iron-deficiency anemia will determine the appropriate approach to treatment. As an example, symptomatic elderly patients with severe iron-deficiency anemia and cardiovascular instability may require red cell transfusions. Younger individuals who have compensated for their anemia can be treated more conservatively with iron replacement. The foremost issue for the latter patient is the precise identification of the cause of the iron deficiency.

For the majority of cases of iron deficiency (pregnant women, growing children and adolescents, patients with infrequent episodes of bleeding, and those with inadequate dietary intake of iron), oral iron therapy will suffice. For patients with unusual blood loss or malabsorption, specific diagnostic tests and appropriate therapy take priority. Once the diagnosis of iron-deficiency anemia and its cause is made, there are three major therapeutic approaches.

RED CELL TRANSFUSION

Transfusion therapy is reserved for individuals who have symptoms of anemia, cardiovascular instability, and continued and excessive blood loss from whatever source and who require immediate intervention. The management of these patients is less related to the iron deficiency than it is to the consequences of the severe anemia. Not only do transfusions correct the anemia acutely, but the transfused red cells provide a source of iron for reutilization, assuming they are not lost through continued bleeding. Transfusion therapy will stabilize the patient while other options are reviewed.

ORAL IRON THERAPY

In the asymptomatic patient with established iron-deficiency anemia and an intact gastrointestinal tract, treatment with oral iron is usually adequate. Encouraging dietary intake of iron-rich foods is also useful. Such foods include oysters, kidney beans, beef liver, tofu, beef (chuck roast, lean ground beef), turkey leg, whole-wheat bread, tuna, eggs, shrimp, peanut butter, leg of lamb, brown rice,