

Pernicious anemia

is a condition in which the body can't make enough healthy red blood cells because it doesn't have enough vitamin B12.

Vitamin B12 is a nutrient found in some foods. The body needs this nutrient to make healthy red blood cells and to keep its nervous system working properly.

People who have pernicious anemia can't absorb enough vitamin B12 from food. This is because they lack intrinsic (in-TRIN-sik) factor, a protein made in the stomach. A lack of this protein leads to vitamin B12 deficiency.

Symptoms

The most common symptom of all types of anemia is fatigue (tiredness). Fatigue occurs because your body doesn't have enough red blood cells to carry oxygen to its various parts.

A low red blood cell count also can cause shortness of breath, dizziness, headache, coldness in your hands and feet, pale or yellowish skin, and chest pain.

A lack of red blood cells also means that your heart has to work harder to move oxygen-rich blood through your body. This can lead to irregular heartbeats called arrhythmias (ah-RITH-me-ahs), heart murmur, an enlarged heart, or even heart failure.

Causes

Pernicious anemia also has other causes, besides a lack of intrinsic factor. Malabsorption in the small intestine and a diet lacking vitamin B12 both can lead to pernicious anemia.

Risk factor

Pernicious anemia also can occur in younger people and other populations. You're at higher risk for pernicious anemia if you:

Have a family history of the condition.

Have had part or all of your stomach surgically removed. The stomach makes intrinsic factor. This protein helps your body absorb vitamin B12.

Have an autoimmune disorder that involves the endocrine glands, such as Addison's disease, type 1 diabetes, Graves' disease, or vitiligo. Research suggests a link may exist between these autoimmune disorders and pernicious anemia that's caused by an autoimmune response

Have had part or all of your small intestine surgically removed. The small intestine is where vitamin B12 is absorbed.

Have certain intestinal diseases or other disorders that may prevent your body from properly absorbing vitamin B12. Examples include Crohn's disease, intestinal infections, and HIV.

Take medicines that prevent your body from properly absorbing vitamin B12. Examples of such medicines include antibiotics .

Are a strict vegetarian who doesn't eat any animal or dairy products and doesn't take a vitamin B12 supplement, or if you eat poorly overall.

Treatment

Vitamins you buy at the drug store don't have enough B-12 in them to treat PA. Your doctor will need to prescribe a special supplement to you. This is often given in a shot. At first, you may need to have one every other day. Over time, you may be able to cut back to once a month.

Your doctor will likely also suggest some changes to your diet. Eating more foods that are high in vitamin B-12 can help you feel better.