

Healthy Habits

July 2008

Tips for reaching and maintaining your optimum state of health

July is Hemochromatosis Screening Awareness Month

In school, we are taught that iron is a good thing, an essential nutrient, helping blood transport oxygen from the lungs to the rest of the body. Unfortunately, too much of this "good thing" can carry serious consequences.

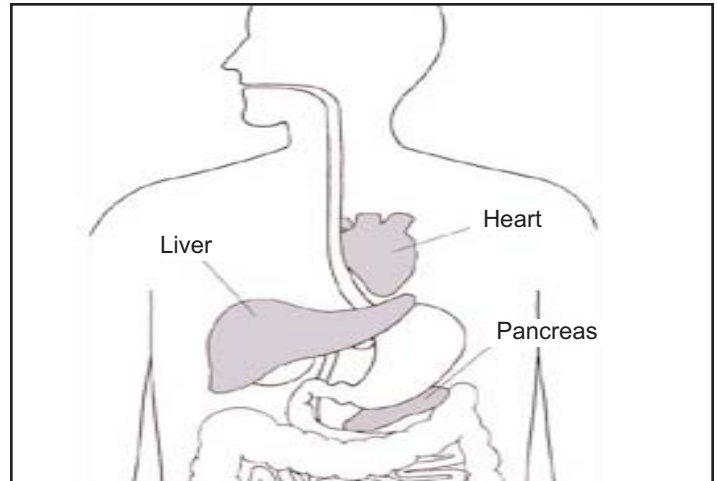
Hemochromatosis, the most common form of iron overload disease, is an inherited disorder that causes the body to absorb and store too much iron. While healthy people only absorb about 10 percent of the iron contained in the food they eat, people with hemochromatosis continually absorb higher amounts, leaving the body with no way to get rid of the excess iron. The excess becomes stockpiled in critical body tissues, such as the liver, heart, and pancreas causing serious damage and possibly failure, over time.

It may be in your genes

Hereditary hemochromatosis is a genetic disorder, one of the most common in the United States. The genetic defect is present at birth, but symptoms rarely appear before adulthood. A person who inherits the defective gene from both parents may develop hemochromatosis. A person who inherits the defective gene from only one parent is a carrier for the disease but may only see a slight increase in iron absorption. Juvenile hemochromatosis and neonatal hemochromatosis are two forms of the disease for which the cause is unknown. The juvenile form leads to severe iron overload and liver and heart disease in adolescents and young adults between the ages of 15 and 30 while the neonatal form causes the same problems in newborn infants.

Recognizing the symptoms

Joint pain is the most common complaint of people with hemochromatosis. Other common symptoms include fatigue, lack of energy, abdominal pain, loss of libido and heart problems. Symptoms may strike at



It is important to know if you are at risk for hemochromatosis as soon as possible. Learn more about the disease, its symptoms and effects at www.digestive.niddk.nih.gov

any age but tend to occur in men between the ages of 30 and 50 and in women over age 50. Still, many people lack symptoms when they are diagnosed. If the disease is not detected early and treated, iron may accumulate in body tissues and eventually lead to serious problems such as arthritis, liver failure, thyroid problems and heart abnormalities. Even diabetes, impotence or early menopause can be related effects.

Establishing the link

Hemochromatosis often goes undiagnosed and untreated. It is considered rare and doctors may not think to test for it. Those who have hemochromatosis may be fooled by the diverse effects and seek treatment only for the individual conditions—arthritis, liver disease, heart disease, or diabetes—rather than on the underlying iron overload and without ever establishing a link between their ailments. That is why it's important to know the symptoms as well as your family history and discuss with your doctor whether you may be at risk. If the iron overload caused by hemochromatosis is diagnosed and treated before organ damage has occurred, a person can live a normal, healthy life. If you believe you have the symptoms of hemochromatosis or a possible family history of the disease or its symptoms, find out more. Knowledge is one good thing you can never have enough of.

The material contained in Healthy Habits is not intended to be medical advice on any particular matter. Readers should seek appropriate professional advice before acting on the basis of any information contained in this publication. This information is provided courtesy of Optima Health.