

# Healthy Habits

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Tips for reaching and maintaining your optimum state of health

## What do you know about Hemochromatosis?

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.

### Are there different types of the disease?

Yes. 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, and the neonatal form causes the same problems in newborn infants.

### How do I recognize 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 sex drive, and heart problems. Symptoms may strike at 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, thy-



**Are you at risk for hemochromatosis?  
Learn more about the disease and its symptoms,  
it just may save your life.**

roid 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 consider testing for it. Even those who have hemochromatosis may be fooled by the diverse effects and seek treatment only for the various conditions—arthritis, liver disease, heart disease, or diabetes—rather than for the underlying iron overload and possibly without ever establishing a link between their illnesses. That is why it's important to know the symptoms as well as your family history and discuss with your doctor or healthcare provider the possibility of 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 still 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 as soon as possible. Websites like [www.digestive.niddk.nih.gov](http://www.digestive.niddk.nih.gov) can provide the information you need to get started and your doctor may offer testing, as needed, to identify a potential problem. There are many unknowns with hemochromatosis, but one thing is clear--the sooner you act, the better.

*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.*