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Is too much iron making you sick?

We all know that not enough iron causes health problems but few realise that for some, too much iron is a problem.

Haemochromatosis is a common genetic disorder in Australia. About 1 in 200 people have the genetic risk for haemochromatosis. People with haemochromatosis absorb too much iron from their diet. The excess iron is stored in the body and in time, this leads to iron overload.

Sunshine Coast Hospital and Health Service Director of Gastroenterology Dr Andrew Sloss says haemochromatosis tends to be under-diagnosed, partly because its symptoms are similar to those caused by a range of illnesses.

“The human body has no method of excreting excess iron. It controls iron levels by absorbing just the right amount of iron from our food. Any excess iron is stored in organs and joints in the body.”

“When iron store build up in the body, organs such as the liver, heart and pancreas are affected and ultimately damaged. Without treatment, haemochromatosis can cause premature death,” Dr Sloss said.

Symptoms of the disease can include fatigue, weakness, lethargy, joint pain and abdominal pain. More severe symptoms of haemochromatosis can present as liver disorders, sexual disorders, neurological and psychiatric disorders.

Both sexes are at risk of haemochromatosis. Women tend to develop the condition later in life because of blood loss during child bearing years. However some women will develop symptoms at an early age.

The good news is that if haemochromatosis is detected before damage occurs, it can be easily treated and is no barrier to a happy and successful life.

Treatment consists of the removal of blood by venesection (similar to donating blood). Up to 500 mL of blood is removed at regular intervals until the iron levels in the blood return to within the normal range.

Regular blood donations can also reduce the amount of iron stored in your body.

As part of Haemochromatosis Awareness Week 8 to 14 August 2016, Sunshine Coast and Gympie residents are being urged to familiarise themselves with the condition, because haemochromatosis is still diagnosed far too late for many people.

“Despite haemochromatosis being a very common genetic disease, many people struggle for years with unexplained symptoms while the condition is overlooked,” Dr Sloss said.
“It’s important people realise how common it is, and that it is a completely manageable condition that shouldn’t affect their quality of life.”

For more information, visit http://haemochromatosis.org.au/

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