

Iron sharpens iron: Women empowering each other for better health

Iron deficiency (ID) is the most common nutritional deficiency worldwide, affecting approximately 2 billion people.¹ Today it's not only a clinical condition, but a serious public health issue.¹ Despite ID's easily identifiable and treatable nature, it is frequently overlooked.² Several obstacles need to be overcome to manage ID effectively.

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1 IN 2
HEALTHY SOUTH AFRICAN WOMEN ARE IRON DEFICIENT¹







WHY IS IRON IMPORTANT?



WHAT ARE THE CAUSES OF IRON DEFICIENCY?

- 
BLOOD LOSS
 e.g., heavy menstrual bleeding⁴
- 
LOW-IRON DIET
 e.g., a vegetarian diet⁴
- 
PREGNANCY⁴
- 
INABILITY TO ABSORB IRON
 e.g., celiac disease, bariatric surgery⁴

WHO IS AT RISK OF IRON DEFICIENCY?

					
WOMEN⁴	PREGNANT WOMEN⁴	ATHLETES⁵	PEOPLE WITH CERTAIN CHRONIC DISEASES⁴	INFANTS AND CHILDREN⁴	VEGETARIANS¹
1 in 3 women experience Heavy Menstrual Bleeding ⁶	Pregnant women have higher iron requirements for the growth of the placenta and a healthy baby ^{4,7}	Athletes are frequently diagnosed with ID. ⁵ Female athletes are twice as likely to be iron deficient than male athletes ⁸	Intestinal disorders can affect your intestine's ability to absorb nutrients from digested food or cause chronic	1 in 2 South African children are iron deficient ⁹	Individuals who don't eat meat need almost twice as much iron from plant foods as the average daily recommended



SO, YOU THINK YOU MAY BE IRON DEFICIENT - WHAT'S NEXT?

Iron deficiency or iron deficiency anaemia should not be self-diagnosed or self-treated.⁴ It is important not to supplement iron deficiency when it should be treated by a healthcare professional.¹⁶⁻¹⁹ Speak to your healthcare professional if you suspect you may be iron deficient or are experiencing symptoms. Iron deficiency must be confirmed with a blood test.

**LEARN MORE ABOUT
IRON DEFICIENCY HERE**

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ID in women

ID affects more women than men, with 20% of women worldwide being iron deficient.⁴ In South Africa, 50 of women suffer from ID⁴ – surpassing the global average.

Individuals with ID may experience fatigue, headaches, increased risk of anxiety and depression, and a slew of other symptoms that can lead to impaired quality of life.⁵⁻⁷ Overall, ID has overwhelming and almost holistic implications that can drastically impact quality of life.

ID is by no means a gendered issue. Whilst it may seem that focusing solely on educating women about ID may reinforce gender stereotypes and skew the scales of gender inequality in healthcare, it is crucial to acknowledge that certain health conditions may affect genders differently.

Just as men are more likely to have high blood pressure, women are more likely to be iron deficient.^{5,8} By providing targeted education and awareness initiatives, the specific needs and concerns of women can be addressed without reinforcing stereotypes.

Empowering individual women in their health journey does not take the stance of assuming that they are solely responsible for managing their health. By providing education about ID, women can become more aware of the symptoms and risk factors associated with ID.

Knowledge equips them with the information needed to be proactive in their healthcare journey. This positions women as active participants in their health, fostering a sense of agency and ownership over the own wellbeing.

Moreover, in some communities, discussing health concerns, especially those related to women's health, might be considered taboo. By actively promoting education and open dialogue about ID, these barriers can be broken down, creating a safe space for women to address these issues without fear or shame.

Educating a woman does not stop at that woman – it ignites knowledge that spans families, communities, and generations.

The power of women

Women support every aspect of society and have the power to enact change. They play pivotal roles in families and communities as caregivers, educators, and decision-makers. When women are informed and healthy, they can better care for their families and advocate for the health of their communities.

History is peppered with real-life stories of women making a difference by sharing knowledge.

During the Women's Suffrage movement, women turned knowledge-sharing into inspiration and action, creating a ripple effect that rallied women across the nation and changed the course of history – something that is still celebrated during Women's Month.

The lesson? By tapping into the collective power of South African women, they can be educated and empowered to share their knowledge of ID, creating a chain reaction to reach women across South Africa.

Positive change can be created by harnessing the power of conversations; South African women can become influencers. One such doctor leading the cause to build clear and coherent messaging around ID is Dr Claire Godwin, a general practitioner at Premier Health Centre who specialises in women's healthcare. She says: "In my practice, I come across iron deficiency anemia on a daily basis. Factors such as pregnancy, delivery, miscarriages, heavy menstruation, as well as poor iron intake, are some of the most common attributable causes," says Dr Godwin. "Often, the women I see are so used to running on fumes with young children, busy careers, or being caregivers to others that they don't even realise how they are feeling is a symptom and not just a consequence of their day-to-day stressors. Education around ID is imperative if we want to help more women function at their best."

In looking at the current campaigns that are emerging out of the health and wellness space in South Africa there are noticeable gaps in which wellness advertising is falling short. There is no denying that this type of advertising is complex with regulations limiting what can and cannot be said, however this does not mean that every form of creativity should be discarded.

At the core of every condition is a human experience. As such, even with a topic like ID, there is an emotional side to the problem: a side that is both de-medicalised and humanised.

To open the conversation about ID amongst South African women, it is important to hear these women; to hear their stories and to encourage knowledge sharing so that they can each become drivers of change. With a treatable condition like ID, the emotion of this realistic storytelling becomes the bigger picture.

Educational approaches are evolving as the significance of tapping into real life narratives becomes more understood. By crafting campaigns that resonate with women, every individual woman can be empowered "To address access and misinformation challenges in South Africa, health and wellness advertising must prioritise education and inclusivity," says Gillian Bridger, managing director for Ogilvy Health. "By understanding our diverse population's unique needs, encouraging open dialogue, and challenging taboos we can create impactful work that empower and drive positive change for a healthier nation. This transformation can ignite a chain reaction of empowerment for all."

Take a moment to think about what the women around you have taught you. As a library of knowledge begins to unfold, the immense role that women have in shaping communities becomes illuminated. Women are at the centre of knowledge, and it is through their collective efforts that South Africa can become healthier and stronger.

To learn more about iron deficiency and to recognise possible symptoms, click here: www.ferrimed.co.za.

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