

Vitamin B12 deficiency – a leaflet from Ivy Grove Surgery

Dear Patient

What does vitamin B12 do and what is vitamin B12 deficiency?

Vitamin B12 is an essential nutrient that helps keep the body's nerve and blood cells healthy. Vitamin B12 deficiency is when the level of vitamin B12 in the blood is too low. This can cause a variety of symptoms and may also produce a type of anaemia where the body produces abnormally large red blood cells that cannot function properly.

What are the symptoms of vitamin B12 deficiency?

These may include extreme tiredness, poor appetite, a lack of energy, pins and needles, a sore and red tongue, mouth ulcers, muscle weakness, breathlessness, pale skin, disturbed vision, psychological problems, which may include depression and confusion, problems with memory, understanding and judgement.

What are the causes of vitamin B12 deficiency?

Age – it is more common as you get older, affecting around 1 in 10 of those aged 75 years or over

Diet – your diet might not include enough vitamin B12, especially if you do not eat meat

Absorption – you might be unable to absorb vitamin B12 properly, e.g., due to antibodies (pernicious anaemia), coeliac disease, gastric surgery or Crohn's disease

Medication – some medications reduce absorption from the stomach, e.g., metformin, omeprazole, colchicine

How is vitamin B12 deficiency diagnosed?

A blood test is used to measure the level of vitamin B12. Further tests might be necessary to look for the cause. If your result is borderline, you may be asked to repeat a blood test after an interval.

Can I get vitamin B12 from my diet?

Absolutely! Vitamin B12 is found naturally in a wide variety of animal foods and in fortified foods. Plant foods do not have vitamin B12 unless they are fortified. The following contain vitamin B12: eggs, meat, poultry, milk and other dairy products, fish, fortified foods including breakfast cereals and bread, soy products, and nutritional yeasts.

What is the treatment for vitamin B12 deficiency?

Please note that due to local prescribing rules we are unable to prescribe oral vitamin B12 tablets in Derbyshire – therefore if you are advised tablets, you must purchase these from pharmacies, health food stores or supermarkets.

Vitamin B12 tablets

To check if your deficiency is related to diet, you may be asked to take vitamin B12 tablets for a trial of 4 weeks, before having a repeat blood test to check your vitamin B12 level. If your vitamin B12 level is very low you may require a course of vitamin B12 injections. If your vitamin B12 level has improved, then improving your diet can help to prevent you from becoming deficient in the future. You may be asked to continue taking vitamin B12 tablets.

Vitamin B12 injections

If it is found that you cannot absorb vitamin B12 from your food, you will be given a course of vitamin B12 injections, usually injections one to three times a week for 2 weeks and then every 3 months lifelong. You will usually need a blood test approximately once a year. We will get in touch with you if this is required.

Where can I get more information about vitamin B12 deficiency?

The following links might be useful:

<https://patient.info/allergies-blood-immune/anaemia-leaflet/vitamin-b12-deficiency-and-pernicious-anaemia>

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/vitamin-b12-or-folate-deficiency-anaemia/>