



MEMBER UPDATE

ReFresh

October 20, 2021



This week...

"B" Aware

About five years ago, a good friend of mine was suffering tremendously. She truly believed she had a terminal disease that her health team could not identify. Years earlier, she began to experience severe fatigue and tingling in her hands. These symptoms continued for a few years and then she slowly developed other symptoms. Her stomach bloated, she experienced heart palpitations, and was frequently out of breath. This was all happening during a time when her 35 year marriage was ending, and her condition required her to take an early retirement from work. As is often the case, the physicians told her it was due to 'stress' and that she was severely depressed.

Christmas of 2015, she was struggling with a swollen tongue, pain in her mouth and throat, she could not taste or smell (and this was before COVID-19!), and was as white as a ghost. Her thoughts felt uncontrollable, and she started to become really concerned about her

mental capabilities. Finally, through persistently asking her family physician, she was referred to an internist in the summer of 2016. It was this physician who finally diagnosed her now very serious health condition. The cure? An injection. And just like that, the same night, she started to feel better. She continued to improve rapidly with ongoing weekly injections. The turn-around was nothing short of amazing.

What was that injection? Simply, B12.

Vitamin B12, also known as cobalamin, is an important water-soluble vitamin that the human body needs to make red blood cells, nerves, DNA, and to carry out other functions, including supporting your nervous system. Like most vitamins, B12 cannot be made by the body, but must be absorbed directly from food or supplements. Another positive fact about B12 supplements is that you may experience a mood boost or a reduction of depression symptoms even if you are not B12 deficient.

Vitamin B12 is naturally found in red meat, poultry, seafood, eggs and dairy. However, it can also be found in products fortified with B12, such as some varieties of bread, cereals, nutritional yeast, and non-dairy milks.

Who is at risk for B12 deficiency?

Anyone is at a risk of deficiency if they do not get enough B12 from their diet or are not able to absorb enough from the food they eat. For example:

- Strict vegetarians and vegans, if they do not eat grains that have been fortified with the vitamin or take a vitamin supplement
- Those with conditions, such as celiac or Crohn's Disease, that interfere with nutrient absorption
- Those who take commonly prescribed heartburn drugs, which reduce acid production in the stomach, as acid is needed to absorb vitamin B12
- Those who have had surgery that removes the part of the bowel that absorbs B12
- People on the drug metformin for diabetes
- Those older than 50, as our ability to absorb B12 diminishes with age. It is recommended that people over 50 take a B12 supplement. You're at risk of deficiency if you don't get enough from your diet, or aren't able to absorb enough from the food you eat

How do I know if I am Vitamin B12 deficient?

A vitamin B12 deficiency can be slow to develop, causing symptoms to appear gradually and intensify over time. It can also come on relatively quickly. Given the array of symptoms a vitamin B12 deficiency can cause, the condition can be overlooked or confused with something else. Unfortunately, as symptoms of a vitamin B12 deficiency can take years to show up, diagnosing it can be complex. A B12 deficiency can sometimes be mistaken for a folate deficiency.

Symptoms of B12 deficiency may include:

- Pale skin, or your skin may appear jaundiced
- Tired or weakness: when you are deficient in B12, your body isn't able to produce enough red blood cells to effectively transport oxygen throughout your body
- A sensation of 'pins and needles': B12 plays an important role in the production of myelin, which insulates your nerves and is critical to your nervous system function. 'Pins and needles' can be a common sign of potential nerve damage in B12 deficiency
- Affected balance, or a change in the way you walk or move
- A red and swollen tongue, known as glossitis
- Breathlessness or dizziness: anemia occurs when the body is unable to transport enough oxygen to all its cells
- Blurred or disturbed vision: in rare cases, there can be an effect to the optic nerve
- Depressed mood or conditions characterized by a decline in brain function, such as dementia

If you are fortunate, an experienced physician may notice the symptoms and detect a B12 deficiency through a good interview and physical exam; a blood test is then ordered to confirm the condition. If you have a mild B12 deficiency, the physician will likely prescribe a supplement, possibly simply a multivitamin. However, if the deficiency is more serious, your condition may be corrected through weekly shots of B12 or a daily high dose B12 pill, assuming your body can absorb the pill contents.

To learn more, check out this [5 min video](#).