

IRON *Will*

It's the silent epidemic that gets little attention. Find out why an iron deficiency may be the root cause of your fatigue, anxiety and even hormonal imbalance.

BY ZOE MEUNIER

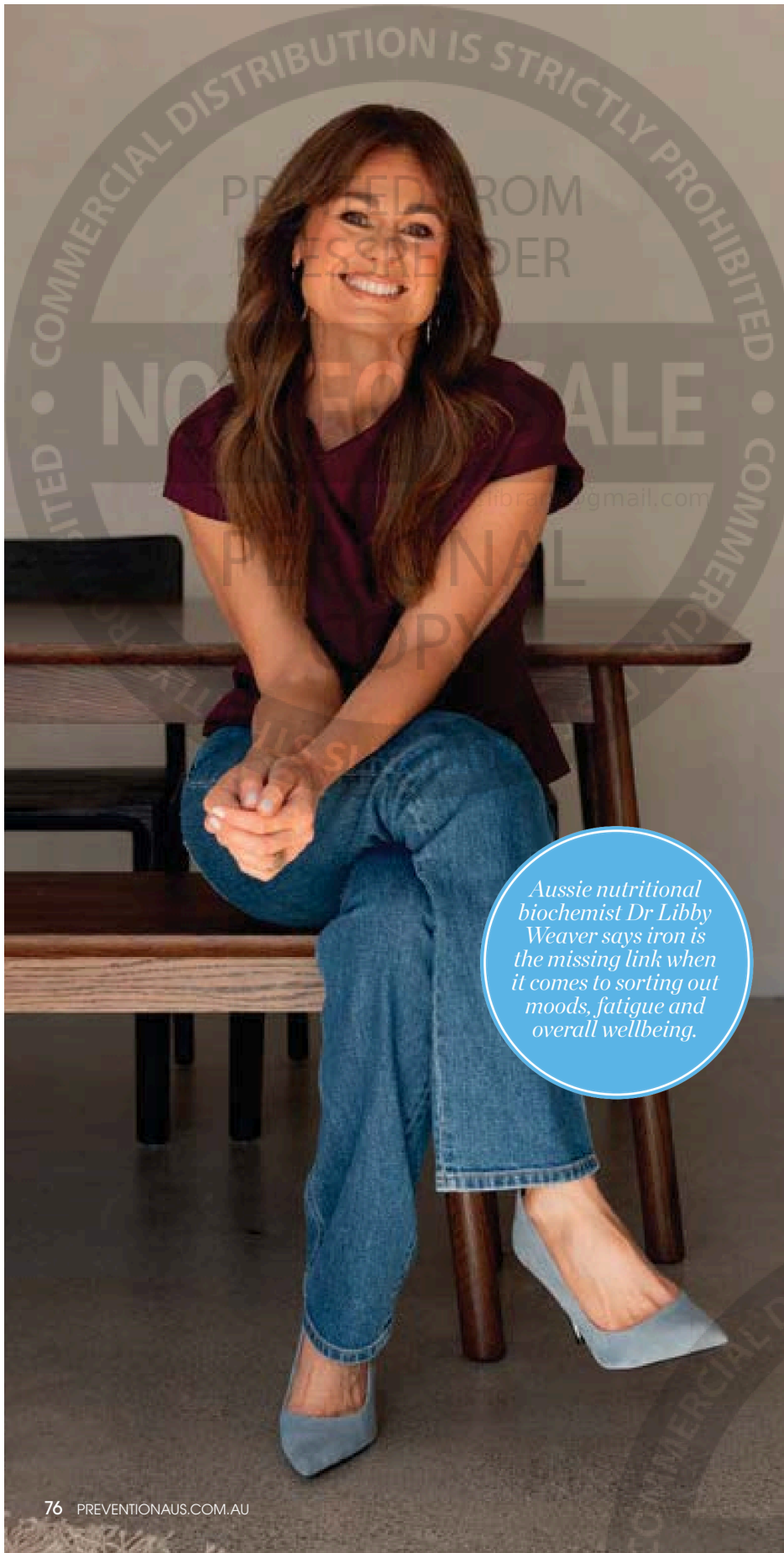
IRON DEFICIENCY

You know the feeling. The bone-deep fatigue that coffee can't touch. The brain fog that clouds even the simplest tasks. The unshakable anxiety that seems to have crept in out of nowhere. For too many women, these symptoms are written off as just life – the natural byproduct of juggling busy careers, kids, relationships, ageing parents and the internal chaos of perimenopause.

But what if it isn't just stress or hormones? What if there's a simple, fixable reason behind the exhaustion, the mood swings, the sleepless nights and even that sudden sense of emotional fragility? Enter iron deficiency – a condition so common, so overlooked and so often misdiagnosed that it's been called a silent epidemic, especially among women in their 30s, 40s and beyond.

"I talk to women all the time who say, 'Oh, yeah, I'm iron deficient,' and then they just stop there," says acclaimed nutritional biochemist Dr Libby Weaver. "It's deeply concerning. We need iron for so many functions inside of us – and yet, most women are just living with this deficiency as though it's normal."

Spoiler: It's not normal. And worse, it's often not even being checked or is being misinterpreted by health professionals. Dr Libby's new book, *Fix Iron First*, explores why this single mineral could be the missing link in energy, mood, hormonal balance and even detoxification. "That iron deficiency is the most common nutritional deficiency globally is unacceptable to me," says Dr Libby. "Too many people live knowingly or unknowingly with iron insufficiency, experiencing anxiety, brain fog, fatigue and a host of other symptoms without realising iron is the missing piece." ►



Aussie nutritional biochemist Dr Libby Weaver says iron is the missing link when it comes to sorting out moods, fatigue and overall wellbeing.

Why women are so vulnerable

Women are uniquely at risk for iron deficiency, particularly during their menstruating and perimenopausal years. The recommended dietary intake (RDI) for iron during this time is 18mg per day – more if you’re an athlete or eat a plant-based diet. Vegans and vegetarians may require up to 32mg daily, given the lower bioavailability of plant-based iron sources.

The challenge? That’s a lot of iron to eat – especially in a culture that encourages kilojoule restriction, intermittent fasting and food rules. Add in skipped meals, digestive issues, stress or avoiding red meat, and iron stores can plummet.

“Technically, a ferritin level of 20 might be considered ‘normal’, but in clinical practice, I’ve found that if a woman’s ferritin is under 50, she’s going to feel fatigued,” says Dr Libby.

And while full-blown iron deficiency anaemia gets the attention, its sneakier cousin – iron deficiency without anaemia – is up to three times more common and much trickier to catch.



Fix Iron First by Dr Libby Weaver (Little Green Frog Publishing, \$39.95) is out now. Also available at drlibby.com

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The symptoms you're probably ignoring

Fatigue is the most well-known symptom of iron deficiency, but it's far from the only one. Here's how low iron might be quietly affecting you:

- ❖ Deep, unrelenting exhaustion
- ❖ Brain fog or trouble concentrating
- ❖ Shortness of breath during everyday activities
- ❖ Hair loss, especially diffuse thinning
- ❖ Heart palpitations or irregular heartbeats
- ❖ Anxiety or nervousness without clear cause
- ❖ Heavier or absent menstrual cycles
- ❖ Pale skin or pale inner eyelids
- ❖ Cold hands and feet
- ❖ Restless legs syndrome
- ❖ Thyroid dysfunction or low metabolism

"We literally need iron to make thyroid hormones," Dr Libby explains. "Your thyroid can't make T4 and T3 [hormones] properly without it. So we start treating women for thyroid conditions, but no one asks, 'What's their iron status?'"



MOOD, HORMONES AND MENTAL HEALTH

One of the most misunderstood consequences of iron deficiency is its impact on mental health, especially anxiety. "There was a 2023 study that showed iron deficiency, even without anaemia, was linked with a wide range of psychiatric symptoms," notes Dr Libby. "We're rushing to label everything as a mental health disorder when, for some people, it might be biochemistry that needs adjusting."

Teenage girls, in particular, may suffer immensely. "I've had teens come in with social withdrawal and debilitating anxiety," Dr Libby shares. "Their iron levels are often shockingly low. Supplementation can completely change their outlook and ability to engage in life."

And in the perimenopausal years, when hormone fluctuations are

often blamed for mood instability and stress, low iron can be an unrecognised aggravator.

Perimenopause is a hot topic – and rightfully so. But in the rush to understand midlife changes, iron deficiency is often overlooked.

"If a woman between 38 and 55 experiences new symptoms, they're immediately assumed to be hormonal," says Dr Libby. "But what if it's iron deficiency? What if it's thyroid dysfunction that's been triggered by low iron?"

Fatigue, mood swings, irregular periods and brain fog, to name a few, overlap heavily between perimenopause and low iron. In some cases, resolving iron deficiency can significantly lessen the impact of the transition – and make other treatments more effective. ▶

IRON DEFICIENCY

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Why your blood test might be lying

Your standard blood panel might say your iron is 'fine', but numbers don't always tell the full story.

Ferritin, the marker for stored iron, can be falsely elevated during periods

of stress, inflammation or even after a long or strenuous workout.






So, while a lab might show a ferritin level of 100ng/mL, the real picture could look more like 30.

"For optimal wellbeing, most women need their ferritin levels above 50 – and many thrive when it's between 80 and 100," Dr Libby advises.



WHAT'S BLOCKING YOUR IRON?

Even if you're eating the right foods, absorption matters when it comes to upping your iron quota. Many factors interfere with your body's ability to take in iron, including:

-  **CALCIUM** Found in dairy products and supplements, calcium competes with iron during absorption.
-  **CAFFEINE** Coffee, tea and even chocolate contain polyphenols that block iron uptake.
-  **PHYTATES AND OXALATES** Found in legumes and leafy greens; healthy but inhibitory.
-  **LOW STOMACH ACID** Stress and age can reduce digestive strength, impeding iron breakdown.
-  **GUT INFLAMMATION** IBS, food sensitivities or medications can impair absorption.

"The timing of your meals and supplements really matters," says Dr Libby. "It's not about going without things, but if we're focused on really improving our dietary intake of iron, it's just separating these things. So, if you have a piece of steak and a glass of milk at the same meal, you won't get very much iron from that. We start to recover iron absorption between two and four hours after we've had a calcium-rich meal, so iron and calcium are best separated at meals. And if people are supplementing, then they very much need to be separated."

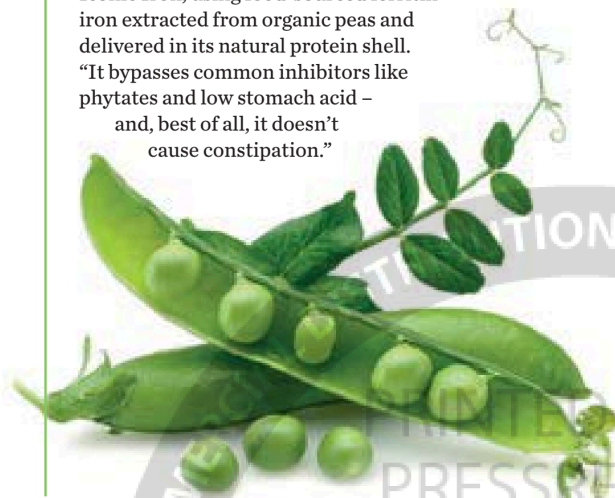
NEXT-GEN IRON SUPPLEMENTS

For those who are found to be iron deficient, Dr Libby explains that diet alone is unlikely to restore your levels effectively. "It's very difficult to rebuild your levels to a robust state without a supplement," she says.

The problem? Traditional iron supplements often come with unwanted side effects: constipation, nausea and abdominal discomfort. "Women would say to me, 'I just feel foul, and the constipation is just not worth it. I'd rather the symptoms of iron deficiency,'" says Dr Libby.

That's where ferritin iron – a new plant-based form – comes in.

"Because ferritin iron uses a different absorption pathway, it doesn't irritate the gut and doesn't require vitamin C to be absorbed," explains Dr Libby, whose NZ-based supplement company Bio Blends has recently launched Iconic Iron, using food-sourced ferritin iron extracted from organic peas and delivered in its natural protein shell. "It bypasses common inhibitors like phytates and low stomach acid – and, best of all, it doesn't cause constipation."





THE TRANSFORMATIONAL POWER OF IRON

So, what happens when you fix your iron? What Dr Libby has seen repeatedly in her practice is that women's resilience is restored.

"When we're low in iron, we're depleted – physically, mentally and emotionally," says Dr Libby. "You don't just feel tired – you question your worth, your strength, your ability to cope. Fixing that isn't just a biochemical correction – it's an act of emotional self-care."

And one that Dr Libby has been happy to see resolved countless times. "Once their iron levels are restored, I hear it over and over again: 'I feel like myself again,'" she says. "People get their spark back. They can think clearly. They sleep better. They're emotionally steadier."

Commonly reported improvements include:

- ▶ Reduced anxiety and emotional fragility
- ▶ Better sleep quality
- ▶ Normalised menstrual cycles
- ▶ Improved thyroid function
- ▶ Enhanced exercise recovery
- ▶ Brighter mood and increased patience
- ▶ Less hair shedding and stronger nails


In some cases, women have reduced or discontinued medications (with medical guidance) after restoring iron.

Body of evidence

As a biochemist who has closely studied the link between biochemistry and emotions, Dr Libby has some extra advice for women who might feel that their body is working against them.

"I encourage women to see the body as this most extraordinary vehicle of communication," she says. "It's always trying to give us information, and sometimes we don't like what it's trying to say, but it's usually giving us feedback about our choices."

Along with the way we eat, drink and move, Dr Libby says these choices also encompass our thoughts and beliefs – especially our ideas about ourselves. "It's not a lack of knowledge that's leading you to polish off a pack of chocolate biscuits after dinner. No one does that thinking, 'I'm going to feel so great after I do this,'" she shares, explaining that unhealthy habits often stem from deep-rooted feelings of unworthiness absorbed unconsciously during childhood.

"Perimenopause is this magnificent opportunity to explore whether we want the second half of our life to look like the first half," she says, "and, obviously, having good iron levels helps us have more resilience to face or explore some of that." 

IRON FIGURES

The facts on iron, according to WHO and Global Burden of Disease studies:

15% of Australian women of reproductive age suffer from iron deficiency anaemia.

12% of pregnant women are affected. Iron deficiency without anaemia is three times more prevalent.

13.3% of children under five are iron deficient – impacting cognitive development and immune function.

11% of male athletes may suffer from low iron, compromising energy, mood and performance.