



## Naperville North High School

899 North Mill Street  
Naperville, Illinois 60563

---

February 20, 2013

To the Parents of NNHS Track and Cross Country Athletes:

The purpose of this letter is to ask – even to strongly urge – you to get your daughter’s iron levels checked regularly – at least once yearly. Anemia, which is the clinical term for low-iron, has derailed too many seasons for our athletes over the years, and I want to do everything in our power to prevent the disappointment of a season lost to anemia from being repeated within our program. Put simply, when a runner is anemic, the blood cannot carry oxygen to the muscles in the necessary and usual amounts. When this happens, a runner becomes fatigued early and cannot perform at anything at or near her best. Fortunately, as common as anemia is among female distance runners, it is also nearly-completely preventable.

To prevent anemia, the girls must have an iron-rich diet as a foundation of basic, healthy living. Girls lose iron through menstruation and are therefore more susceptible to anemia than are their male counterparts. The first responsibility we preach to the girls is to partake of an iron-rich diet. This would include regular lean red meat, raw spinach and other leafy greens, as well as many beans. For a more complete list, please visit the American Red Cross website (<http://www.redcrossblood.org/learn-about-blood/health-and-wellness/iron-rich-foods>).

The second responsibility is to know what the baseline iron levels are at all times. This is where the iron test comes in. The most accurate measure to use is the **serum ferritin test**, which is a measure of the amount of iron being stored by the blood. Usually, when doctors test for iron, they do not do this particular test without an indication of anemia. The problem with that is that the serum ferritin test is the best predictor of future trouble with anemia. Low ferritin levels are directly related to the onset of anemia. Once a runner is beset by the symptoms of anemia, she has often lost the entire season, as it takes weeks or oftentimes months to regain a functional level of iron in the blood to allow for peak-level endurance performance. As a result, a serum ferritin level below 30 indicates that the levels are low and supplementation is needed. A measurement below 20 indicates serious trouble, and the runner is often symptomatic. The point of a regular test is to prevent our runners from dipping below 30, into the range where health and performance would be affected.

Unfortunately, the serum ferritin test is a relatively-expensive one and it is usual that doctors will resist such a test in the absence of any symptoms of anemia. To the extent you are comfortable and able, I would urge you to insist on such a test if your daughter is to be a serious runner. I have seen too many seasons derailed by anemia to be delicate about such an issue. I hate to see a young person’s hard work fail to pay off because of such a preventable condition. If you ever have any questions about this, please do not hesitate to contact me at [diverson@naperville203.org](mailto:diverson@naperville203.org). Additionally, I am including some links to great articles that you might use to inform yourselves or, perhaps, convince your doctor that a serum ferritin test is a good idea for your daughter. I also have some thoughts on the best forms of supplementation (liquid iron, for example, is the easiest to absorb into the body and therefore works most quickly), so don’t hesitate to contact me about that as well. But in the meantime, please plan some time to both make sure your daughter eats a diet rich in natural iron and to schedule a serum ferritin test at regular intervals (at least annually). Thanks so much for your consideration on such a vital issue.

Sincerely,

Dan Iverson  
Head Girls’ Cross Country Coach  
Assistant Girls’ Track and Field Coach

### Helpful Links:

<http://www.trackandfieldnews.com/hs/coachscorner/20051215.html>

<http://www.pfitzinger.com/labreports/iron.shtml>

<http://runningwritings.blogspot.com/2011/11/ferritin-hemoglobin-and-iron-deficiency.html> (a blog entry but good stuff)