

Original Article

Cite this article: Abbas M, Gandy K, Salas R, Devaraj S, Calarge CA (2023). Iron deficiency and internalizing symptom severity in unmedicated adolescents: a pilot study. *Psychological Medicine* **53**, 2274–2284. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291721004098>

Received: 3 May 2021

Revised: 12 September 2021

Accepted: 17 September 2021

First published online: 16 December 2021

Key words:

Adolescents; anxiety disorders; basal ganglia; ferritin; iron deficiency; major depressive disorder

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Iron deficiency and internalizing symptom severity in unmedicated adolescents: a pilot study

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Abstract

Background. Iron plays a key role in a broad set of metabolic processes. Iron deficiency is the most common nutritional deficiency in the world, but its neuropsychiatric implications in adolescents have not been examined.

Methods. Twelve- to 17-year-old unmedicated females with major depressive or anxiety disorders or with no psychopathology underwent a comprehensive psychiatric assessment for this pilot study. A T1-weighted magnetic resonance imaging scan was obtained, segmented using Freesurfer. Serum ferritin concentration (sF) was measured. Correlational analyses examined the association between body iron stores, psychiatric symptom severity, and basal ganglia volumes, accounting for confounding variables.

Results. Forty females were enrolled, 73% having a major depressive and/or anxiety disorder, 35% with sF < 15 ng/mL, and 50% with sF < 20 ng/mL. Serum ferritin was inversely correlated with both anxiety and depressive symptom severity ($r = -0.34$, $p < 0.04$ and $r = -0.30$, $p < 0.06$, respectively). Participants with sF < 15 ng/mL exhibited more severe depressive and anxiety symptoms as did those with sF < 20 ng/mL. Moreover, after adjusting for age and total intracranial volume, sF was inversely associated with left caudate (Spearman's $r = -0.46$, $p < 0.04$), left putamen ($r = -0.58$, $p < 0.005$), and right putamen ($r = -0.53$, $p < 0.01$) volume.

Conclusions. Brain iron may become depleted at a sF concentration higher than the established threshold to diagnose iron deficiency (i.e. 15 ng/mL), potentially disrupting brain maturation and contributing to the emergence of internalizing disorders in adolescents.

Background

Iron deficiency is the most common nutritional deficiency in the world (CDC, 2002; Looker, Cogswell, & Gunter, 2002). After initially decreasing with the introduction of food enrichment in the United States, the prevalence of iron deficiency has resurged, particularly among certain age, sex, and racial/ethnic groups (Gupta, Hamner, Suchdev, Flores-Ayala, & Mei, 2017; Looker et al., 2002; Sun & Weaver, 2021). For instance, between the 1988–1994 and the 1999–2000 NHANES survey, the prevalence of iron deficiency increased from about 1% to 5% in 12- to 15-year-old males. Moreover, while the prevalence of iron deficiency ranges between 9% and 16% in 12- to 19-year-old females, it is nearly twice as prevalent in non-Hispanic Black and Mexican American females compared to their non-Hispanic White counterparts (Gupta et al., 2017; Looker et al., 2002; WHO, 2001).

Iron deficiency may have significant implications for mental health. Iron is an essential micronutrient, involved in oxygen transport, cellular respiration, and DNA synthesis (Beard & Connor, 2003; Youdim, 2008). The main mechanism for the brain to uptake iron primarily involves endocytosis of transferrin bound to its receptor (TfR1), with a significant contribution by the divalent metal transporter 1 (DMT1) (Rouault & Cooperman, 2006; Wade, Chiou, & Connor, 2019). Ferritin can also be directly transported across the blood-brain barrier (BBB) (Wade et al., 2019). Oligodendrocytes have both a high content and utilization rate of iron (Moller et al., 2019). In contrast, while neurons have a high iron requirement, they have little capacity to store it (Connor & Menzies, 1996), making them particularly vulnerable to iron deficiency. Additionally, brain iron content differs by anatomical region and age, with the basal ganglia and red nucleus containing the most iron, while the cortical gray and white matter have low iron content (Haacke et al., 2005; Hallgren & Sourander, 1958). This distribution, already apparent in childhood and adolescence (Peterson et al., 2019), accentuates with age (Sedlacik et al., 2014).

Mechanistic studies have implicated iron deficiency in monoaminergic signaling impairment, partially mediated by the fact that iron is a cofactor for tyrosine hydroxylase (Anderson et al., 2009; Baumgartner et al., 2012a, 2012b; Baumgartner, Smuts, & Zimmermann, 2014; Beard, Erikson, & Jones, 2002; Burhans et al., 2005; Coe, Lubach, Bianco, & Beard, 2009; Jellen et al., 2013). Iron deficiency is associated with alterations in the expression of dopamine-related genes and decreased density of dopamine transporters and dopamine D₁ and D₂ receptors in the basal ganglia (Beard, Chen, Connor, & Jones, 1994; Burhans et al., 2005; Erikson, Jones, & Beard, 2000; Erikson, Jones, Hess, Zhang, & Beard, 2001; Jellen et al., 2013; Nelson, Erikson, Pinero, & Beard, 1997; Pino et al., 2017). Iron deficiency is also associated with disrupted serotonergic and noradrenergic function as well as with impaired total mitochondrial oxidative capacity at the beginning of peak dendritic growth (Bastian, von Hohenberg, Georgieff, & Lanier, 2019; Baumgartner et al., 2012a, 2012b, 2014; Mohamed, Unger, Kambhampati, & Jones, 2011). These abnormalities result in cognitive and behavioral deficits, including inattention and anxiety-like behaviors (Beard et al., 1994, 2002; Carlson, Stead, Neal, Petryk, & Georgieff, 2007; Fritham et al., 2012; Golub, Hogrefe, & Germann, 2007; Kennedy et al., 2014; Mohamed et al., 2011; Schmidt, Waldow, Grove, Salinas, & Georgieff, 2007; Tran et al., 2016).

Consistent with these preclinical findings, low body iron has been associated with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and several observational and intervention studies in women of reproductive age have implicated iron deficiency in depressive symptoms (Beard et al., 2005; Corwin, Murray-Kolb, & Beard, 2003; Fordy & Benton, 1994; Karl et al., 2010; Low, Speedy, Styles, De-Regil, & Pasricha, 2016; Rangan, Blight, & Binns, 1998; Vahdat Shariatpanaahi, Vahdat Shariatpanaahi, Moshtaaghi, Shahbaazi, & Abadi, 2007). Surprisingly, however, little research has examined the association of iron deficiency with internalizing (i.e. depressive and anxiety) symptoms in school-aged children and adolescents (Matsuo et al., 2008; Vulser et al., 2015). One retrospective Japanese study in 6- to 15-year-old children with serum ferritin concentration (sF) <50 ng/mL, referred for a child and adolescent psychiatric evaluation, found iron supplementation effective at increasing sF and reducing psychiatric symptoms (Mikami et al., 2019). Two randomized double-blind placebo-controlled iron supplementation studies in adolescent females examining cognitive outcomes reached divergent conclusions, with only one reporting an improvement in 'mood, lassitude, and concentration' following replenishment of iron stores (Ballin et al., 1992; Bruner, Joffe, Duggan, Casella, & Brandt, 1996). Finally, one study utilized the Taiwanese national health insurance database, finding that iron deficiency anemia was associated with more than twofold increased risk for depressive or anxiety disorders, compared to those without anemia (Chen et al., 2013).

Importantly, anemia (regardless of its etiology) is known to be associated with irritability, apathy, fatigue, low mood, and concentration difficulties (Murray-Kolb, 2011), complaints that overlap with internalizing symptoms, making it necessary to characterize the psychiatric effects of iron deficiency in the absence of anemia.

In this pilot study, we examined the prevalence and clinical correlates of iron deficiency in adolescent girls with and without anxiety or depressive disorders, who were otherwise healthy. We hypothesized that iron deficiency would be associated with more severe internalizing symptoms. Given that altered basal ganglia morphometry, metabolism, and perfusion have been implicated in internalizing disorders (Bastian et al., 2019; Beard et al., 1994;

Bourre et al., 1984; Cammer, 1984a; Connor & Menzies, 1996; Matsuo et al., 2008; Tansey & Cammer, 1988; Vulser et al., 2015) and that these structures are key nodes in the fronto-subcortical neural circuits, underlying various processes relevant to mood regulation (Williams, 2016) and because iron deficiency disrupts neurotransmitter signaling in the basal ganglia (Baumgartner et al., 2012a, 2012b, 2014), we further sought to examine the association between iron deficiency and basal ganglia volumes.

Methods

Participants

This analysis used data collected in the context of two studies, with the first participant enrolled on 02/12/2016. Both enrolled participants with the same demographic and clinical characteristics, with one focused on examining gut permeability in major depressive disorder (MDD) (Calarge, Devaraj, & Shulman, 2019), while the other focused on brain imaging (Calarge et al., 2017). In both studies, 12- to 17-year-old unmedicated females with MDD, anxiety disorders (i.e. separation anxiety disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, or social phobia), or with no psychiatric disorders (i.e. healthy controls) were enrolled from general pediatrics clinics if they had a normal body mass index (BMI, i.e. between the 5th and 85th percentile for age and sex). The presence of bipolar disorder, autistic disorder, schizophrenia, obsessive-compulsive disorder, ADHD, and/or eating disorder led to exclusion. Additional exclusionary criteria included the presence of intellectual disability or language barrier due to inability to complete study procedures, treatment with psychotropics within 6 months before study entry, and presence of a serious general medical condition (e.g. involving a vital organ) or pregnancy. Individuals exposed to major traumatic events (e.g. death of loved ones, natural disaster, etc.) in the prior 6 months were also excluded (Calarge et al., 2019). Furthermore, the use of non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs or medications for seasonal allergies or asthma in the prior week, of pre/probiotics in the prior 6 weeks, or of antibiotics in the prior 6 months; or a major change in diet (e.g. switching to vegetarian or excluding a food group, like eggs or dairy products) in the prior 6 weeks or the presence of functional gastrointestinal disorders all led to exclusion from the first study, as these factors may alter gut permeability. Participants wearing braces or having any contraindication for undergoing magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) were excluded from the brain imaging study.

The study was approved by the Baylor College of Medicine Institutional Review Board. After the study details were reviewed, written consent was obtained from parents or legal guardians and verbal assent from the participants.

Procedures

A board-certified child and adolescent psychiatrist conducted an unstructured interview with the adolescent and parent. The MINI International Psychiatric Interview V6.0, a structured clinical interview based on the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders (DSM-5) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), was administered to the parent by trained research staff. Also, the participants completed the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale for Children (CESD-C) and the Screen for Child Anxiety-Related Disorders (SCARED), both well-validated and widely used

measures of depressive and anxiety symptoms, respectively (Birmaher et al., 1999, 1997; Faulstich, Carey, Ruggiero, Enyart, & Gresham, 1986; Weissman, Orvaschel, & Padian, 1980). Best-estimate DSM-5-based diagnoses were generated, using all available clinical information.

Race and ethnicity were self-reported. The parents also reported their household income and educational level. Participants rated their sexual maturity using a validated form (Calarge, Acion, Kuperman, Tansey, & Schlechte, 2009; Calarge, Mills, Ziegler, & Schlechte, 2018). When applicable, they also noted the first day of their last menstrual period, the typical duration of their cycle, and the average number of sanitary pads used per day, during their menses. Participants 13 years of age and older were also queried about the use of hormonal contraception. The parents completed a questionnaire about birth history, including prenatal care, *in-utero* prescribed or illicit drug exposure, and pre/perinatal complications. The parents were also asked to rate their confidence level in the information recalled. Additionally, medical records were reviewed, since birth when available, to extract information related to body iron status (i.e. hemoglobin and history of anemia or transfusion).

Height was measured to the nearest 0.1 cm with a wall-mounted stadiometer (Ayrton Model S100, Hamburg, Germany) and weight was recorded to the nearest 0.1 kg (Seca 220 digital scale, Hamburg, Germany) with participants in indoor clothes without shoes. These measurements were obtained in duplicate, and the average was used.

The 2004 Block Food Frequency Questionnaire (FFQ) for Ages 8–17 was completed by the participants, with parents assisting as needed (D’Occhio, Fordyce, Whyte, Aspden, & Trigg, 2000). The FFQ includes 77 food items, developed based on the NHANES 1999–2002 dietary recall data. The nutrient database was developed from the USDA Nutrient Database for Dietary Studies, version 1.0. Individual portion size is asked, and pictures are provided to enhance the accuracy of quantification. When available, the FFQ allowed estimating daily iron intake. Poor iron intake was defined as an estimated daily intake <8 mg/day for 12- and 13-year-olds and <15 mg/day for older female participants (Trumbo, Schlicker, Yates, & Poos, 2002).

Participants underwent a venous blood draw, in the morning, after at least a 9 h fast. Serum was used to measure sF (Immunoassay on Vitros 5600 Chemistry System, Ortho Clinical Diagnostics, Raritan, NJ, USA).

Brain imaging acquisition and segmentation

MRI of the brain was obtained using a 3 T Siemens PRISMA scanner equipped with a 64-channel head-neck coil. Anatomical imaging included a 3D MPRAGE T1-weighted scan sequence (TR/TI/TE = 2400/1000/2.24 ms, 0.8 mm isotropic resolution). The raw MRI data were inspected by a trained operator for scanner-related artifacts (including head motion) immediately following scan acquisition. T1-weighted MRI scans were preprocessed and analyzed using Freesurfer version 6.0 (<http://surfer.nmr.mgh.harvard.edu>), a brain imaging software designed to characterize the morphometric properties of the brain (Fischl et al., 2002, 2004). Subcortical brain volumes were segmented based on the standardized Aseg atlas. For this study, we focused on basal ganglia volume including the putamen, globus pallidus, and the caudate (online Supplementary Fig.), given these structures’ higher iron content and to minimize the risk for type 1 error (Haacke et al., 2005; Hallgren & Sourander, 1958). Total intracranial volume was adjusted for in the analysis of these basal ganglia subregions.

Statistical analysis

BMI was computed as weight/height² (kg/m²) and age-sex-specific BMI Z-scores were generated based on the 2000 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention normative data (Ogden et al., 2002). Following published guidelines, iron deficiency was defined as sF < 15 ng/mL (WHO, 2011). However, in light of evidence suggesting that such cutoff may be too conservative (Garcia-Casal et al., 2018; Mast, Blinder, Gronowski, Chumley, & Scott, 1998; North, Dallalio, Donath, Melink, & Means, 1997), we also examined the association of iron deficiency with outcomes of interest using the more liberal cutoff of 20 ng/mL.

Given the comorbidity between depressive and anxiety disorders, we computed an internalizing symptoms composite z-score capturing the symptoms severity on both the SCARED and CESD-C (Song, Lin, Ward, & Fine, 2013). Group differences between participants with and those without internalizing disorders were compared using the Wilcoxon rank-sum test for continuous variables and χ^2 or Fisher’s exact test for categorical variables. Multivariable regression analyses examined the associations between iron deficiency status and outcomes of interest (e.g. depression or anxiety symptom severity or basal ganglia volume), accounting for relevant confounders. Cohen’s *d* effect size was computed (Cohen, 1988). Analyses used procedures from SAS version 9.4 for Windows (SAS Institute Inc, Cary, NC, USA).

Results

Participants

Table 1 summarizes the demographic and clinical characteristics of the 40 participants contributing data to this analysis. Although no significant differences in demographic characteristics between participants were found, participants with internalizing disorders tended to be older, and more likely to be Hispanic and post-menarchal. Although participants with internalizing disorders had lower sF and a numerically higher prevalence of iron deficiency (whether defined as sF < 15 or 20 ng/mL), these differences did not reach statistical significance (Table 1).

Association between iron markers and internalizing symptoms

Serum ferritin concentration was inversely correlated with internalizing symptom severity as captured by the composite z-score ($r = -0.36$, $p < 0.03$), the SCARED ($r = -0.34$, $p < 0.04$), and the CESD-C ($r = -0.30$, $p < 0.06$). Notably, compared to those without iron deficiency (defined as sF < 20 ng/mL), participants with iron deficiency had significantly higher internalizing symptom composite z-score (z-score = 0.73 *v.* -0.73, respectively, Cohen’s *d* = 0.82, $p < 0.02$) as well as higher scores on the SCARED ($p < 0.002$) and the CESD-C ($p < 0.03$) (Fig. 1A). Moreover, the magnitude of this association was even greater in participants with sF < 15 ng/mL compared to those with sF \geq 15 ng/mL (Cohen’s *d* = 1.01, $p < 0.005$ for the composite z-score; $d = 1.08$ for the SCARED, $p < 0.003$; and $d = 0.83$ for the CESD-C, $p < 0.02$; Fig. 1B).

Iron markers and basal ganglia morphology

Of the 24 participants who underwent brain imaging, 16 (67%) had an internalizing disorder and nine (38%) had sF < 15 ng/mL. Differences in demographic variables or in iron deficiency prevalence between participants with *v.* those without internalizing disorders were not statistically significant (all *p* values > 0.05).

Table 1. Demographic and clinical characteristics of female adolescents ($n = 40$) with internalizing disorders v. healthy controls

	Healthy controls $N = 11$	Internalizing $N = 29$	p value
Age, yrs	14.5 ± 1.6	15.2 ± 1.6	>0.10
White race, n (%)	7 (64%)	20 (69%)	>0.50
Hispanic, n (%)	2 (18%)	14 (48%)	>0.10
Median household income, $\$ \times 10^3$ /yr	70 (39–140)	80 (25–140)	>0.40
BMI Z-score ^a	0.64 ± 0.43	0.33 ± 0.67	>0.10
Sexual maturity rating, % in stages I, II, III, IV, V	9/9/27/18/36	0/7/17/45/31	>0.20
Had menarche, n (%)	9 (82%)	28 (97%)	>0.10
Time since menarche, yrs	3.3 ± 2.5	3.5 ± 1.8	>0.80
Poor iron intake, ^b n (%)	4 (67%)	11 (73%)	>0.90
Duration of last menses, days	5.6 ± 1.6	5.7 ± 3.4	>0.90
Number of daily sanitary pads	3.6 ± 0.7	3.6 ± 1.1	>0.80
Luteal phase ^c , n (%)	5 (56%)	18 (64%)	>0.70
Menorrhagia present ^d , n (%)	1 (13)	2 (7)	>0.50
Hormonal contraception ^e , n (%)	1 (11)	3 (11)	>0.90
Serum ferritin, ng/mL	29.5 ± 20.2	22.1 ± 14.4	>0.10
Serum ferritin <15 ng/mL, n (%)	2 (18%)	12 (41%)	>0.10
Serum ferritin <20 ng/mL, n (%)	4 (36%)	16 (55%)	>0.20
SCARED	12.9 ± 9.1	37.9 ± 15.2	<0.0001
CESD-C	5.3 ± 3.8	30.0 ± 12.4	<0.0001
Internalizing symptoms composite Z-score	-2.18 ± 0.67	0.83 ± 1.55	<0.0001

Mean ± s.d., unless otherwise specified.

SCARED, Screen for Child Anxiety Related Disorders; CESD-C, Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale for Children.

^aBMI Z-score: age-sex-specific body mass index.

^bDietary data were available for only 15 participants with internalizing disorders and 6 healthy controls.

^cLuteal phase was defined as within 14 days of the end of each participant's 'average' menstrual cycle length.

^dMenorrhagia was defined as duration of menses of >7 days or use of >12 sanitary pads per day.

^eOnly participants ≥ 13 years old ($n = 35$) were queried about hormonal contraceptives use.

After adjusting for age and total intracranial volume, sF was inversely associated with the volume of the left caudate (Spearman's $r = -0.46$, $p < 0.04$, Table 2), left putamen ($r = -0.58$, $p < 0.005$), and the right putamen ($r = -0.53$, $p < 0.01$). Similarly, there was a statistical trend for the left putamen and caudate volumes to be larger in participants with iron deficiency, as defined by sF < 15 ng/mL (Fig. 2A). The effect sizes were somewhat smaller for the right basal ganglia structures, compared to the left (Fig. 2B).

Discussion

To our knowledge, this pilot study is the first to examine the association between body iron stores, internalizing symptoms severity, and brain structure in unmedicated adolescent females, who have undergone a thorough psychiatric assessment. Body iron stores were inversely associated with more severe anxiety and depressive symptoms and positively associated with basal ganglia morphometry.

Iron deficiency and internalizing disorders in youth

Internalizing disorders in adolescents are common and impairing, with recent data suggesting increasing incidence (Twenge, Cooper, Joiner, Duffy, & Binau, 2019). Many factors are likely implicated, given the heterogeneous nature of depressive and

anxiety disorders. That iron deficiency would contribute to the recent change in the prevalence of internalizing disorders in adolescents is plausible for several reasons: (1) iron plays a critical role in the brain, potentially impacting the structure and function of mood-relevant areas, (2) iron deficiency is common in adolescence (CDC, 2002, 2014; Gupta et al., 2017; Looker et al., 2002), and (3) available evidence suggests that replenishing iron stores may improve internalizing symptoms (Mikami et al., 2019).

To our knowledge, however, the prevalence of iron deficiency in adolescents with internalizing disorders has not been examined. We found that 32% of our participants had sF < 15 ng/mL. This high prevalence of iron deficiency, which may be partially accounted for by the over-representation of Hispanic females in our study (Gupta et al., 2017; Looker et al., 2002; WHO, 2001), is particularly troubling given that our participants had undergone a thorough screening to rule out many general medical conditions that could cause iron deficiency. Moreover, the pre/perinatal history and the medical record review exclude the possibility that our findings represent chronic sequelae of early-life or concurrent anemia (online Supplementary Data). As such, to the best of our knowledge, our participants were healthy, had received good prenatal care, had not had perinatal anemia, but did have low iron intake despite coming from households with a median income nearly double the national average (Table 1).

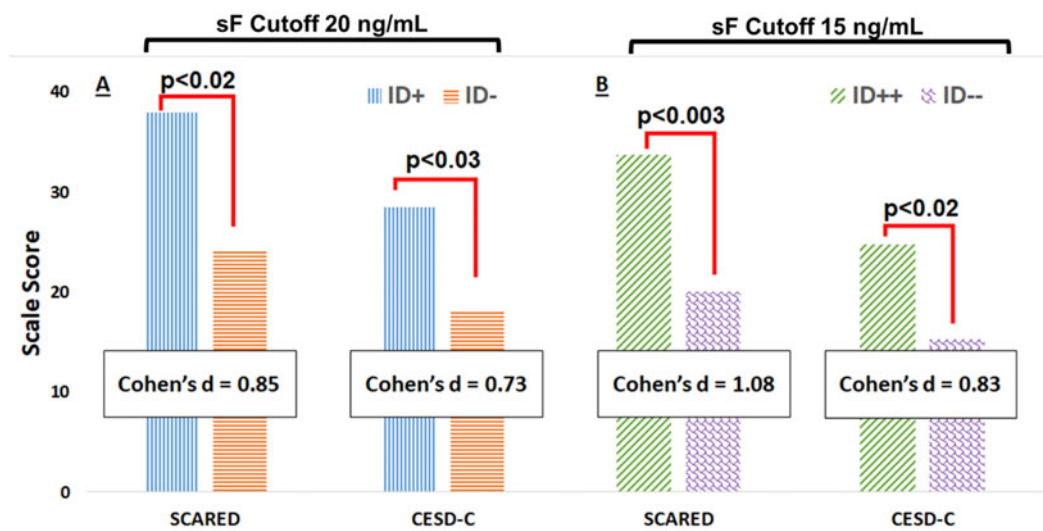


Fig. 1. (A) Least squares means for internalizing symptom severity in unmedicated adolescent females with sF < (ID+, blue) v. ≥ 20 ng/mL (ID-, orange), adjusted for age. (B) Same comparison but between those with sF < (ID++, green) v. ≥ 15 ng/mL (ID--, purple).

Table 2. Least squares means for basal ganglia structures volumes (mL) in unmedicated female adolescents ($n = 24$) with iron deficiency v. those without, adjusted for age and intracranial volume

	Serum ferritin (sF) cutoff of 15 ng/mL				Serum ferritin (sF) cutoff of 20 ng/mL			
	sF ≥ 15 N = 15	sF < 15 N = 9	Cohen's d	p value	sF ≥ 20 N = 11	sF < 20 N = 13	Cohen's d	p value
Left basal ganglia	10.48	11.08	0.80	<0.08	10.48	10.90	0.53	>0.20
Left putamen	4.93	5.23	0.74	<0.10	4.88	5.17	0.71	<0.10
Left caudate	3.59	3.84	0.74	<0.10	3.61	3.74	0.352	>0.40
Left pallidum	1.96	2.01	0.24	>0.50	1.98	1.98	0.0055	>0.90
Right basal ganglia	10.54	10.96	0.73	>0.10	10.52	10.85	0.54	>0.20
Right putamen	5.011	5.200	0.70	>0.10	4.49	5.16	0.62	>0.10
Right caudate	3.71	3.88	0.55	>0.20	3.71	3.82	0.32	>0.40
Right pallidum	1.81	1.87	0.34	>0.40	1.81	1.86	0.26	>0.50

This low iron intake is consistent with recent data showing a trend for reduction in iron intake in the US population, with an associated increase in the prevalence of iron deficiency anemia. The large effect sizes we found for the association between iron deficiency and internalizing symptoms highlight the potential for replenishing iron stores to reverse the recently documented increase in the prevalence of depressive and anxiety disorders in adolescents (Mojtabai & Olfson, 2020; Mojtabai, Olfson, & Han, 2016)

Brain iron homeostasis during iron deficiency

Understanding the interplay between iron deficiency and brain structure and function across the lifespan requires one to consider three inter-related factors: (1) iron transport into the brain, (2) hierarchy of iron distribution to bodily systems, and (3) how

the presence of iron deficiency has been defined. Once the BBB matures during infancy, iron transport into the brain becomes tightly regulated, protecting it from daily fluctuations in systemic iron levels (Wade et al., 2019). Preclinical and clinical studies have established that iron is prioritized for erythropoiesis, for evident survival advantage. As the body is faced with insufficient iron intake to meet its needs, iron reserves are tapped in a relatively hierarchical order (e.g. liver, skeletal muscle, heart, etc.) and, with increasing iron deficiency severity, iron is eventually diverted even from the brain to the bone marrow (Ennis, Dahl, Rao, & Georgieff, 2018; Guiang, Georgieff, Lambert, Schmidt, & Widness, 1997; Zamora, Guiang, Widness, & Georgieff, 2016). Finally, historically, iron deficiency has been the focus of public health interventions due to its association with anemia. Current guidelines to diagnose ID have been based on anemia-relevant markers, such as bone marrow iron content and sF below

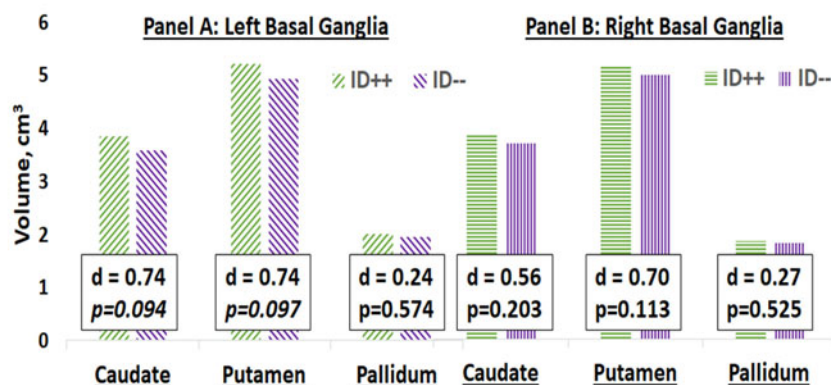


Fig. 2. Cohen's *d* for the differences in least squares means for basal ganglia structures volumes in females with $sF < 15$ ng/mL (ID++, green) v. ≥ 15 ng/mL (ID--, purple), accounting for age and total intracranial volume.

which anemia develops (WHO, 2011). They are not based on the assessments of brain iron content or the emergence of neuropsychiatric manifestations. Considering these three factors together, it thus follows that, compared to infants who may not benefit from the protective effect of the BBB yet, brain iron content in adolescents will only be impacted once a threshold (in terms of severity of body iron stores depletion) has been crossed. However, what severity of iron deficiency is needed to overcome the homeostatic mechanisms of the BBB, resulting in brain iron depletion, is unknown. What appears certain is that brain iron is drawn upon before anemia develops. This is supported by studies in adolescents and young adults with iron deficiency but without anemia finding improvement in neurocognitive and emotional functioning following iron supplementation (Ballin et al., 1992; Beard et al., 2005; Corwin et al., 2003; Fordy & Benton, 1994; Karl et al., 2010; Low et al., 2016; Rangan et al., 1998; Vahdat Shariatpanaahi et al., 2007; Verdon et al., 2003). This appears consistent with our findings both concerning internalizing symptom severity and subcortical structures volumes.

Notably, we found a larger association between internalizing symptom severity and iron deficiency (a categorical variable) compared to *sF* (a continuous variable). This is consistent with the BBB's role in protecting the brain from fluctuations in body iron until the homeostatic mechanisms are overwhelmed (Wade et al., 2019). When iron deficiency is defined more liberally, as $sF < 20$ ng/mL, the association with symptom severity remains significant, albeit of a smaller magnitude, suggesting that the cut-off for *sF* of < 15 ng/mL to define iron deficiency may be overly conservative, having been established based on hematological outcomes without regard to the function of other organs, like the brain. In fact, for those participants with a hemoglobin level obtained within one year before study entry, anemia was quite

uncommon with only one person affected (online Supplementary Data). In patients with restless leg syndrome, iron supplementation aims to raise *sF* > 50 ng/mL. However, the association between peripheral and brain iron content has not been well examined in general and not at all in adolescents. Identifying the threshold below which iron deficiency starts drawing on brain iron is an area that requires urgent attention, with potentially widespread clinical implications.

Iron deficiency and brain structure and function

Brain iron is also critical for myelin formation (Bastian et al., 2019; Beard & Connor, 2003; Lange & Que, 1998). Oligodendrocytes are enriched with iron-requiring enzymes involved in lipid metabolism, needed for initial myelin deposition as well as for maintaining its integrity (Bourre et al., 1984; Cammer, 1984a, 1984b; Connor & Menzies, 1996; Tansey & Cammer, 1988). Two brain imaging studies have explored the association between brain iron content and brain function in children. Peterson et al. used data collected in healthy 12- to 21-year-olds, enrolled in the National Consortium on Alcohol and Neurodevelopment in Adolescence study (Peterson et al., 2019). They repurposed scans obtained for functional MRI and diffusion tensor imaging (DTI) to track brain iron distribution, replicating the fact that several subcortical nuclei are iron-rich, and that iron accumulates with increasing age but plateaus by early adulthood. Additionally, working memory speed was inversely associated with iron signal in the left dentate nucleus and substantia nigra (Peterson et al., 2019). Similarly, Carpenter et al. used brain imaging to estimate brain iron content in 39 healthy children (56% female, mean age 9.5 ± 1.3 years), finding again a positive association between age and iron content in the

basal ganglia (Carpenter *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, the right caudate iron content was positively associated with spatial IQ (Carpenter *et al.*, 2016).

Using structural brain imaging, we found an inverse association between body iron status and the volumes of the putamen and the left caudate. The effect sizes were smaller for the right hemisphere structures, perhaps reflecting the lateralization in brain iron content observed in some studies (Langkammer *et al.*, 2012; Xu, Wang, & Zhang, 2008). This inverse association may reflect the fact that brain iron moderates the decrease in subcortical structures volume observed during late childhood and adolescence (Raznahan *et al.*, 2014; Wierenga *et al.*, 2014). It may also reflect iron deficiency-induced impairment in dopaminergic signaling (Beard *et al.*, 1994; Burhans *et al.*, 2005; Erikson *et al.*, 2000, 2001; Jellen *et al.*, 2013; Nelson *et al.*, 1997; Pino *et al.*, 2017). Preclinical studies have linked stimulant-induced reduction in dopamine D₂ receptor density in the ventral striatum with an increase in putamen volume (Chang *et al.*, 2005; Churchwell, Carey, Ferrett, Stein, & Yurgelun-Todd, 2012; Groman, Morales, Lee, London, & Jentsch, 2013; Jan, Lin, Miles, Kydd, & Russell, 2012; Jernigan *et al.*, 2005). Similarly, clinical studies have found enlarged putamen in patients with stimulant use disorders (Ersche *et al.*, 2017, 2011, 2012; Jacobsen, Giedd, Gottschalk, Kosten, & Krystal, 2001). Finally, our finding is also consistent with increased basal ganglia volumes following extended treatment with 'typical' antipsychotics, characterized by potent dopamine D₂ antagonist activity (Corson, Nopoulos, Miller, Arndt, & Andreasen, 1999; Navari & Dazzan, 2009). The basal ganglia are a key node in the cortico-striato-thalamo-cortical loops, subserving a multitude of neuropsychological processes implicated in psychopathologies, such as inhibitory control and reward processing (Drysdale *et al.*, 2017; Janiri *et al.*, 2019; Pizzagalli *et al.*, 2009; Wei & Wang, 2016; Williams, 2016). Whether iron supplementation would reverse these structural changes requires future studies.

Timing of iron deficiency and persistence of neuropsychiatric sequelae

Given the key role iron plays in a broad set of metabolic processes, it is not surprising that iron deficiency would be associated with cognitive and neuropsychiatric deficits (Vulser *et al.*, 2016). However, the nature, severity, and chronicity of these effects are closely tied to the time during development when iron deficiency ensues (Barks, Hall, Tran, & Georgieff, 2019; Georgieff, 2017). The earlier the exposure, the broader the impact on neurocognitive functioning given the brain's substantial iron-dependent metabolic needs early in life, when brain structures underlying basic neurocognitive processes are rapidly developing (Barks *et al.*, 2019; Georgieff, 2017; Georgieff, Brunette, & Tran, 2015; Lozoff & Georgieff, 2006). This is thought to involve irreversible impairment in gene expression, affecting neuronal growth and plasticity (Georgieff *et al.*, 2015). These 'sensitive periods' have been shown both in animal and clinical studies (Barks *et al.*, 2019; Georgieff, 2017; Mudd *et al.*, 2018). For instance, children exposed to iron deficiency *in-utero* or in infancy, show motor, cognitive, emotional, and social deficits long after iron stores had been replenished (Barks *et al.*, 2019; Doom *et al.*, 2018; Lozoff, Jimenez, Hagen, Mollen, & Wolf, 2000; Lozoff *et al.*, 2013). Additionally, in children with ADHD, Turner *et al.* found that a small mean corpuscular volume (a marker of iron deficiency) in the toddler years predicted poor response to psychostimulant treatment in elementary school (Turner, Xie,

Zimmerman, & Calarge, 2010). However, in contrast to what appears as persistent sequelae when iron deficiency occurs early in life, cognitive deficits in children and adults with iron deficiency, with or without anemia, can improve with iron repletion (Chmielewska *et al.*, 2019; Grantham-McGregor & Ani, 2001; Low *et al.*, 2016; McCann & Ames, 2007). For example, iron supplementation in 5- to 8-year-old children with ADHD and women with postpartum depression reduces symptom severity, particularly in those with iron deficiency (Konofal *et al.*, 2008; Sever, Ashkenazi, Tyano, & Weizman, 1997; Wassef, Nguyen, & St-Andre, 2019). In other words, which sequelae arise closely depend on which brain areas are most metabolically active and/or rapidly developing at the time of iron deficiency, making them particularly vulnerable to its impact (Lozoff & Georgieff, 2006; Vulser *et al.*, 2016).

Some limitations of our pilot study must be acknowledged. First, our findings are based on a relatively small sample size, requiring replication in a larger study. Second, given that internalizing disorders disproportionately affect adolescent females, we did not recruit males. As such, whether our findings extend to males remains to be seen. Third, because this was a cross-sectional evaluation, the direction of the causal association between iron deficiency and our outcomes of interest cannot be established. While low sF is the most specific non-invasive marker of iron deficiency, with excellent reproducibility (Belza, Erbsoll, Henriksen, Thilsted, & Tetens, 2005), neither the duration of iron deficiency was available, nor the presence of anemia ruled out as we did not measure hemoglobin. Because some symptoms associated with anemia may overlap with internalizing symptoms (Murray-Kolb, 2011), future studies should exclude the confounding effect of anemia to best examine the independent effect of iron deficiency on the brain. Given the exploratory nature of this study, no correction for multiple comparisons was made. As shown in Table 1, 62% of the participants were estimated to be in the luteal phase of their menstrual cycle, a time when ferritin tends to be higher (Kim, Yetley, & Calvo, 1993). As such, the rate of iron deficiency may have been even higher had we enrolled the participants upon the onset of their menstrual phase. Finally, measuring C-reactive protein would have ruled out cases of inflammation, where ferritin would have been elevated. However, the stringent inclusion/exclusion criteria and the high prevalence of iron deficiency suggest that our participants did not have acute inflammation.

In summary, given iron's role in multiple metabolic processes affecting brain structure and function, iron deficiency can have a wide-ranging impact on brain development. In youth, this may compound their proclivity to develop internalizing disorders and compromise treatment response. Future studies, ideally longitudinal, should examine how changes in iron status during pubertal maturation may moderate brain development and the emergence of psychopathology. This risk may impact males and females differently, given that iron deficiency disproportionately affects menstruating females, particularly of minority background. Moreover, future interventions should seek to examine the clinical benefits of replenishing iron stores.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291721004098>.

Acknowledgements. The authors thank the families and the research team members.

Financial support. This research received no specific grant from any funding agency, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Conflict of interest. None.

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