

Boosting your blood with iron

Why iron tablets have been prescribed for you

This leaflet is for people who have low levels of iron in their bodies and have been prescribed iron tablets. It explains why iron tablets are important and how they work.

Why is iron important?

Iron is used to prevent and treat anaemia. Iron is essential for the body to make haemoglobin, a pigment that makes red blood cells red. When the amount of iron in the body gets too low, the haemoglobin level falls below normal. This is known as "iron deficiency anaemia". Haemoglobin is very important as it carries oxygen from the lungs to the rest of the body. If your haemoglobin or iron levels are low this may make you feel tired and not able to carry out your normal routine.

Why do I need to take iron tablets?

Your haemoglobin and iron levels may already be low or you may be at risk of getting low levels in the near future. People who are losing blood from their bodies such as from the bowel are especially at risk of becoming low in iron and anaemic. Sometimes bleeding from the bowel may not be visible in the stools (faeces). A telescope to look inside your bowel can help find out the cause of bleeding.

How do iron tablets work?

The best way to treat low body iron levels is to take iron, either as a tablet or liquid. Iron is also sometimes given into a vein. Iron tablets are safe, effective and easy to take so are usually tried first. Iron in the tablet is taken up by the gut and used by the body to make new red blood cells. Iron tablets in the right dose can make as much difference as 2 bags of blood naturally in your body within a few weeks if iron deficiency anaemia is present. Treatment with iron may take a couple of weeks to start to make a difference to how you feel.

Why is having a 'reserve' of iron important?

Any extra iron taken up by the gut that is not needed to make new red blood cells is stored by the body. This reserve of iron can then be used to make new blood cells in the future whenever blood is lost by the body. If low iron levels are corrected before surgery then the body is able to make new red blood cells more quickly after the operation. This helps with recovery and reduces the chance of needing a blood transfusion.

How long do I need to take iron tablets for?

Iron tablets are often needed for at least a few months but it is different in each person's case. It depends on the cause of low iron levels, amount of blood loss and response to the initial few weeks of treatment. Ask your doctor how long you need to take them for and re-check after any blood tests and once the cause of your low iron levels has been sorted out. There may be times that you need to stop your iron tablets briefly such as before a colonoscopy or just after an operation. Check with your doctor. If they are stopped always ask when you need to restart them so they are not forgotten about.

Can increasing the iron in my diet help with low iron levels?

Once a person has already become low in iron and anaemic it is difficult to get enough iron back into the body even with a diet that is high in iron. Iron tablets get the levels back to normal more quickly, then diet can be used to keep the levels up (as long as the bleeding has stopped).

For more information:

Talk to your GP, surgeon, specialist or nurse

BloodSafe

Anaemia resources for doctors including iron dosing chart: www.health.sa.gov.au/bloodsafe under toolbox

Iron tablet recommended:

Dose:

Taking iron tablets

Not all iron tablets contain enough iron to treat low iron levels

This leaflet is for people who have low iron levels in their bodies and have been prescribed iron tablets. It explains how to take them and how to reduce side effects.

Iron tablets with enough iron

A variety of iron tablets/tonics are available without a prescription but most do not have enough iron in them to make a difference. Iron tablets with the right amount of iron include Ferrogradumet, Ferrograd-C, Ferro-f-tabs, Fefol and FGF. Take the tablet recommended by your doctor. Do not use other iron tablets/tonics instead.

How do I take iron tablets?

- > Take as directed by your doctor (usually 1 tablet once or twice a day). If a tablet is needed twice a day then your doctor may recommend starting with 1 a day for a few days then increase to twice a day.
- > Iron is better absorbed if taken on an empty stomach (one hour before or two hours after a meal) if possible.
- > Take iron tablets with water or juice NOT tea, coffee, cola, cocoa or red wine (these reduce amount of iron absorbed). Take tablets whole (do not crush/chew).
- > Iron tablets should be taken 2 hours or more after some types of medications including antacids (like Mylanta or Gaviscon), calcium tablets, & some medications for osteoporosis, thyroid or Parkinson's as well as some antibiotics. Check with your doctor or pharmacist.

What side effects might I get?

Not everybody gets side effects from iron tablets. Occasionally they cause tummy upset, nausea (feeling sick), tummy pain (cramps), constipation and diarrhoea.

These usually improve as your body gets used to them. If you have other symptoms or if the symptoms above become bad or worrying contact your doctor.

It is normal for iron tablets to make your stools/faeces (poo) turn black.

Ways to ease side effects

- > Taking iron tablets with food or at night may help ease tummy upset.
- > If constipation is a problem, increasing your daily fluid and fibre intake can help. Ask your doctor or pharmacist for advice regarding a gentle laxative if needed.
- > The following may sometimes help (discuss with your doctor):
 - > changing tablets (to a different iron salt)
 - > taking 1 tablet, 2 or 3 times per week
 - > taking a lower iron dose (1/2 or 1/3 of the strength of the tablet) as liquid (Ferro-liquid) slowly increasing to 2 or 3 times daily.

NOTE: There are many iron tablets/tonics available with only very small amounts of iron in them (hence they do not cause side effects). They are not strong enough to increase your iron levels quickly enough.

Other ways of giving iron

If iron tablets cannot be tolerated (especially when significant anaemia is present), intravenous (IV) iron through a drip may be needed, in consultation with a specialist. This is not often required as the above suggestions are usually effective. Injection of iron into the muscle (IM) is not recommended as it is painful & can cause permanent skin scarring/dyscolouration.

KEEP OUT OF REACH OF CHILDREN

- > Iron tablets, like all medicines should be kept in a locked cupboard out of reach and sight of children.
- > A small amount of iron can be poisonous, even fatal in infants and young children.
- > Never give an adult dose to a child.
- > If a child accidentally takes iron tablets call the Poisons Information Centre immediately on 131126.

For more information:

Talk to your GP, surgeon, specialist or nurse

© Department of Health, Government of South Australia. All rights reserved. BloodSafe June 2010 v 1.1