

Taking iron supplements

Te kai āpitihanga rino

Iron deficiency (lack of iron) can make you feel tired, faint and breathless. It can also make you look pale, and it may affect your ability to concentrate.

Low iron is not the only cause of these symptoms. If you think you are low in iron, talk to your general practice team. You will need a blood test to diagnose iron deficiency. If the level of iron in your blood is low, your general practice team may prescribe an iron supplement. You may need to take it for several months.

Once your levels are back to normal, it should be possible to get all the iron you need from eating a wide variety of healthy food without supplements. Taking iron supplements if you are not low in iron may be harmful, especially in tamariki (children).

Types of iron supplements

There are different types of iron supplements available. They come in tablet or liquid form. Some are available in the supermarket and over the counter at the pharmacy. You can also get some on prescription from your general practice team or dietitian. Your general practice team, pharmacist or dietitian can advise which is best for you.

Tips on taking iron supplements

Take the supplement as advised by your general practice team or dietitian. Or follow the directions on the label.

- Measure doses for tamariki accurately using a medicine measure.
- Take the supplement with food if you get an upset stomach.

Iron is better absorbed when you have no food in your stomach, but it is more likely to upset your stomach this way. If this happens, take your supplement at mealtimes.

- Take the supplement with vitamin C. Vitamin C helps the body to absorb up to 4 times more iron. Take your supplement with a vitamin C rich fruit. For example, berries, feijoas, kiwifruit, mandarin, orange, rock melon or tamarillo. You could also take your iron supplement with a small glass of orange juice or a vitamin C supplement.
- Do not take with some foods and medications.





Some drinks, foods and medications make it harder for your body to absorb iron. Take 1 hour before or 2 hours after having:

- tea or coffee
- milk, yoghurt or cheese
- calcium supplements
- antacids, such as Mylanta and Quick-Eze.

Side effects

Some people have side effects when taking iron. The most common side effect is dark-coloured bowel motions (poos), which are not harmful. Other side effects can include feeling sick (nausea), an upset stomach, constipation or diarrhoea.

You might be able to reduce side effects by:

- taking the iron supplement with food
- splitting the daily dose, for example, if you take 2 tablets a day, take 1 with breakfast or lunch and the other with dinner
- taking a lower dose until your symptoms settle down. Halve the daily dose or take it every other day
- drinking at least 8 cups of fluid and having at least 5 servings of vegetables and 2 servings of fruit every day. Also, plenty of wholegrains, especially if you get constipated. It might also help to read about Fibre and fluid for healthy bowels.

If you have tried all these things and you still have side effects, ask your general practice team, dietitian or pharmacist for advice. If you stop taking the supplement, your iron levels will not improve.

Liquid iron supplements

Liquid iron supplements can sometimes stain your teeth. To prevent or reduce these stains:

- mix each dose in water, fruit juice, or tomato juice. Drink it through a straw to help keep the iron supplement from getting on your teeth
- if you are taking the supplement by a dropper or syringe, place the dose well back on your tongue and follow it with water or juice.

If iron supplements do not work

Occasionally, iron supplements are not enough to get your iron levels up. In this case, you may need to have Intravenous (IV) iron.

Written by HealthInfo clinical advisers. Last reviewed November 2023.