

Taking iron supplements

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, so if you think you are low in iron talk to your doctor or practice nurse, as iron deficiency is diagnosed through a blood test. If the level of iron in your blood is low you may be prescribed an iron supplement, which you may need to take for several months.

Once your levels are back to normal, it should be possible to get all the iron you need from a healthy balanced diet without needing supplements. Taking iron supplements if you are not low in iron may be harmful, especially in men, or women who are not menstruating.

Types of iron supplements

There are different types of iron supplements available and they come in tablet or liquid form. Some are available in the supermarket and over the counter at the pharmacy and others you can only get on prescription from your doctor or dietitian. Your doctor, pharmacist or dietitian can advise what is most appropriate for you.

Tips on taking iron supplements

- Take the supplement as advised by your doctor or follow the directions on the label.
- Measure children's doses accurately using a medicine measure.
- Take 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 cause upset 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 four times more iron. Take your supplement with a vitamin C rich fruit (berries, feijoas, kiwifruit, mandarin, orange, rock melon, tamarillo), a small glass of orange juice, or a vitamin C supplement.
- Don't take with some foods and medications. Some drinks, foods, and medications make it harder for your body to absorb iron. Take one hour before or two 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 aren't 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 two tablets a day take one with breakfast or lunch and the other with dinner
- taking a lower dose until your symptoms settle. Halve the daily dose or take it every other day
- drinking at least eight cups of fluid and having at least five servings of vegetables and fruit, and six servings of breads and cereals every day, especially if you get constipated. It might also help to read about Fibre and fluid for healthy bowels.

If you've tried all these things and you still have side effects, ask your doctor 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 and 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 with water or juice.

If iron supplements don't work

Occasionally, iron supplements aren't 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 May 2020.