

Oral Iron Supplementation

Why do I need to take iron supplements?

It has been recommended that you take iron supplements because your iron levels are low.

Low iron levels occur for a variety of reasons:

- Not enough iron in your diet
- Chemotherapy
- Radiation therapy
- Chronic illness
- Loss of blood

Low iron levels may make you feel tired, out of breath, low in energy and make it difficult to concentrate. To increase your iron levels your doctor has recommended that you take iron supplements.

What does iron do in my body?

Your body needs iron because it is an essential mineral that:

- Helps create red blood cells, which transport oxygen throughout the body
- Is involved in cell growth
- Is part of many proteins & enzymes that maintain good health

Suggestions for Iron Supplement Intake

Factors that increase Iron Absorption:

- Taking your iron supplement an hour before or after a meal
- Taking your iron with a glass of orange juice or a source of Vitamin C. Other sources of Vitamin C include oranges, melon, and strawberries.
- Take your iron in 2-3 small doses instead of one large dose.

Factors that decrease Iron Absorption:

- Consuming milk at the same time as iron supplements.
- Consuming high fiber foods, such as whole grains, raw vegetables, and bran or processed foods that contain phosphates at the same time as you take your iron supplement.
- Consuming coffee or tea or carbonated beverages at the same time as you take your iron supplement
- Taking iron at the same time as vitamin or mineral supplements or medications (antacids).

Side Effects of Iron Supplements

Iron supplements will increase your energy levels however they sometimes cause these side effects:

- Constipation
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Dark coloured stools
- Diarrhea
- Abdominal discomfort

Tips to Minimize Side Effects

- Start with half the recommended dose and gradually increase to full dose
- If the iron is making you nauseous take it with a meal. Try to avoid milk, coffee, and tea at this meal.
- Take the iron in multiple small doses, rather than in one large dose.
- If you are experiencing constipation talk to your doctor about medication to improve bowel movements.
- If these suggestions do not minimize side effects try an *enteric coated* or *delayed release* iron. These have fewer side effects but are not as well absorbed.

If none of these recommendations work, talk to your doctor about changing to a different type of iron. It is important that you take your iron supplement, but you should experience minimal side effects when doing so.

What happens if I take too much iron?

It is dangerous to take too much iron because it will accumulate in your tissues and organs once your iron stores are full. For this reason it is important that you follow the dosage and time-frame that your doctor or dietitian gives you. This will minimize risks of toxicity and side effects and allow you to achieve the maximum benefit from taking your iron supplements.

Additional Resources

For more information about iron supplements or iron rich foods check out the websites below:

<http://ods.od.nih.gov/factsheets/iron/>

<http://www.hamiltonhealthsciences.ca/documents/Patient%20Education/IronRichFoods-trh.pdf>

<http://www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthfiles/hfile68d.stm>

<http://www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthfiles/hfile68c.stm#hf68c007>

[http://www.eatrightontario.ca/en/Articles/Nutrients-\(vitamins-and-minerals\)/Iron-Matters.aspx](http://www.eatrightontario.ca/en/Articles/Nutrients-(vitamins-and-minerals)/Iron-Matters.aspx)