

# 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. 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 your lungs to the rest of your 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?

In pregnancy the growing baby will need iron from the mother and this depletes the mother's stores. It is important to replenish those stores to prevent fatigue and to have better reserves for delivery, recovery and breast feeding.

Most women will drop their iron stores during pregnancy, especially in the second half of pregnancy. This happens even in women who eat an iron-rich diet that contains meat. Women who are already iron deficient or who eat very little or no meat in their diet will almost certainly require iron supplements during pregnancy. Although some vegetables contain a lot of iron, very little of this iron can actually be absorbed.

## How do iron tablets work?

The best way to treat low body iron levels is to take iron supplements, either as a tablet or liquid. Both these are safe in pregnancy and are, an effective and easy way to boost iron stores.

Iron in the tablet help your body make new red blood cells and prevents anaemia. Iron tablets, in the right dose, can make as much difference as adding almost a litre of blood naturally in your body within a few weeks if you are anaemic. You should start to feel a difference after taking iron tablets for just two weeks.

**For more information:**  
**Talk to your doctor or midwife**

## Why is having a ‘reserve’ of iron important?

Having a good store of iron means that you will have enough iron available to make the red cells your body needs as well as the iron that is needed for your growing baby.

It is also good to have a store of iron so that you can quickly replace the blood you will lose when the baby is born and are less likely to need a blood transfusion.

You will need all the energy you can get when you are looking after your new baby. Low iron levels can make you feel very tired.

## How long do I need to take iron tablets for?

Iron tablets are often needed for three to six months after your baby is born. This will depend on a lot of different factors including your diet and whether you are breast feeding. It is important to check how long you should take them with your doctor or midwife. You might need to have blood tests to check how well the iron tablets are working for you.

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

It is pretty much impossible to eat a diet that will supply you with the amount of iron that you need each day during pregnancy. By the end of pregnancy you will have very low iron stores if you don't take iron supplements.

You can certainly help by maximising the amount of iron you eat in your diet. The best sources of iron are from red meat such as lamb and beef. Chicken, pork and fish are also good sources of iron. Eating foods with Vitamin C in them, such as oranges, lemons, strawberries, blueberries and capsicum is a good way to boost the amount of iron your body will absorb.

You should avoid drinking tea and coffee with your meals as this can slow the absorption of iron from food. Vegetables like spinach and broccoli as well as food like molasses and, tofu do have a lot of iron in them but we can't get much iron out of non-meat foods.

# Taking iron tablets

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

## Iron tablets with enough iron

A variety of iron tablets and tonics are available without a prescription but most do not have enough iron in them to make a difference. If you are really low in iron you will need to take iron tablets with the right amount of iron and will need a prescription from your doctor or midwife. The tablets prescribed by a doctor or midwife have a much higher amount of iron and are cheaper. A whole month's supply of prescription iron tablets costs \$1 – that is only 3 cents a day

## How do I take iron tablets?

- > Take as directed by your doctor or midwife (usually one tablet once or twice a day). If a tablet is needed twice a day then your doctor or midwife 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. Do not take them with tea, coffee, cola, cocoa or red wine as these reduce the amount of iron absorbed.
- > Swallow the iron tablets whole, do not crush or chew.
- > Iron tablets should be taken two hours or more after some types of medications including antacids (like Mylanta or Gaviscon), calcium tablets, and some antibiotics. Check with your doctor, midwife or pharmacist.

## What side effects might I get?

Not everybody gets side effects from iron tablets. Occasionally they cause tummy upset, nausea, tummy pain, constipation or diarrhoea. These usually improve as your body gets used to the tablets.

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

If you have other symptoms or if the symptoms above become bad or worrying contact your doctor or midwife.

## 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, midwife or pharmacist for advice regarding a gentle laxative if needed.
- > Changing the type of tablet, frequency or dose may help. You should discuss this with your doctor or midwife before making any changes.

NOTE: There are many iron tablets and tonics available with only very small amounts of iron in them, so 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 if anaemia is significant, intravenous iron through a drip may be needed. This is not often required as the above suggestions are usually effective.

Injection of iron into the muscle is not recommended as it is painful and can cause permanent skin scarring or discolouration.

### **KEEP IRON TABLETS 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 and can be 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 (NZ) immediately on 0800 764 766