

# A guide to taking iron tablets

## Information for patients, families and carers

### Why is iron important?

Our bodies need iron. Iron is used to make haemoglobin – the part of your red blood cells that carries oxygen around your body. It is also important for muscle strength, energy and good mental function. If your iron levels are low this may make you feel tired and not able to do normal everyday activities. As the amount of iron in the body falls even lower, the haemoglobin level drops below normal. This is known as iron deficiency anaemia.

### Why might I be prescribed iron tablets or iron liquid?

Your doctor will prescribe iron tablets or liquid when a blood test shows that you need more iron. Once you are already low in iron it is difficult to get enough iron back into your body just by changing your diet. Iron tablets and liquids contain iron at higher levels than food. They help to replace iron more quickly. Iron tablets should only be taken when recommended by your doctor.

### Are all iron tablets or iron liquids the same?

**No.** The amount of iron in different tablets or liquids varies quite a lot. Many different iron tablets and tonics can be bought over-the-counter (without a prescription) but not all of these have enough iron in them to make a difference. It is important that you take the tablet recommended by your doctor.

### How do I take iron tablets?

- > Follow the instructions given by your doctor about how many tablets you should take and when to take them
- > Take the tablets whole, do not crush or chew them
- > Iron is best absorbed on an empty stomach (one hour before or two hours after a meal) with a glass of water or juice. Vitamin C in fruit juice can help a bit more iron get into the body but is not essential – water is fine.
- > DO NOT take your iron tablet or liquid with tea, coffee, milk, chocolate, cola or wine as these reduce the amount of iron absorbed by the body
- > DO NOT take the following medicines at the same time as iron tablets or liquid – calcium; antacids (eg. Mylanta and Gaviscon); some medications for osteoporosis, thyroid or Parkinson's; some antibiotics. Check with your doctor or pharmacist how many hours to space them out by.

#### **KEEP OUT OF REACH OF CHILDREN**

- > Iron tablets, like all medicines, should be kept in a locked cupboard out of reach 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.



### What side effects might I get? How can I reduce them?

Not everybody gets side effects from iron tablets or liquid. If you do, they often improve as your body gets used to them. Side effects include:

- > Constipation and diarrhoea. Having more fluid and fibre in your diet can help reduce constipation. If needed, ask your doctor or pharmacist for advice about a gentle laxative.
- > Tummy upset, nausea (feeling sick) or tummy pain (cramps). Taking iron with food or at night can help. These symptoms can also be helped by taking iron in smaller amounts (eg. taking 1 tablet two or three times a week) or taking a lower dose of iron each day (eg. using iron liquid) and slowly increasing the amount – these changes should only be made after talking with your doctor.
- > It is normal for iron tablets to make your bowel motions (poo) turn black.

Some people are not able to tolerate iron tablets or iron liquid. If this does happen to you, don't worry as iron can be given by injection into your vein. Ask for the Intravenous Iron Infusion brochure if this applies to you.

### What to tell your doctor or pharmacist

- If you are currently taking any other medicines, including over-the-counter
- If you buy any additional over-the-counter medicines check with the pharmacist that they are ok to take with your iron tablets or liquid
- If your bowel motions are tarry-looking or have red streaks
- If you have pain or soreness in your tummy
- If any side effects are concerning you

### How long will I need to take iron tablets?

This depends on the reason for your lack of iron and how you respond to treatment. A course of treatment is usually at least several months. Your doctor will arrange further blood tests to check that the tablets are working and further plan your treatment. Make sure you ask when this needs to be done.

There may also be times that you need to stop your iron tablets briefly (eg. before a colonoscopy or after an operation). If they are stopped, make sure you know when you need to start taking them again.

**My Iron Plan:** Name of iron tablet(s) recommended:.....

OR any of these circled:

Ferro-tab, Ferro-f-tab, FGF, Fefol, Ferrogradumet, Ferrograd C, Maltofer

Dose / how often to take them: .....

Date started: ..... Date of follow up tests: .....

Other Notes: .....

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### For more information:

**Talk to your doctor, nurse, midwife or pharmacist**

Patient materials at: [www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/bloodorgantissue](http://www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/bloodorgantissue)

