

Iron supplements

Peer reviewed by Sid Dajani

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✓ Meets Patient's **editorial guidelines**

Est. **4 min** reading time

Iron supplements are best absorbed when they are taken an hour before meals. However, to reduce stomach upset, you may prefer to take your doses after meals.

Common side-effects include stomach upset, constipation and diarrhoea.

Remember to keep iron supplements out of the reach and sight of children – iron is a common cause of serious accidental ingestion in children.

At a glance

- Iron supplements treat and prevent iron-deficiency anaemia.
- They help your body make haemoglobin, which carries oxygen in the blood.
- Take iron supplements about an hour before a meal, or after if you feel sick.
- Common side-effects include feeling sick, stomach pain, constipation, and diarrhoea.
- Iron can cause serious problems if taken accidentally or in overdose, especially by children.
- If you suspect an overdose, seek immediate medical help.
- Iron can make your stools darker, which is harmless.



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About iron supplements

Type of medicine	Oral iron
Used for	Prevention and treatment of iron-deficiency anaemia
Also called	Ferrous sulfate, ferrous fumarate, ferrous gluconate, sodium feredetate, polysaccharide-iron complex
Available as	Tablets, capsules, oral liquid medicine, oral liquid sachets and oral drops

Iron-deficiency anaemia is caused by a lack of iron. Iron is needed to make haemoglobin which carries oxygen around in the bloodstream and is what makes red blood cells red.

If you have iron-deficiency anaemia, it means that there is a reduced amount of oxygen being carried around in your body. This can cause tiredness, breathlessness, dizziness, the sensation of having a 'thumping heart' (palpitations) and headache.

Iron is found naturally in certain foods, but in conditions where people do not get enough iron from their normal diet for their body's needs, an iron supplement may be useful.

Before taking iron supplements

Some medicines are not suitable for people with certain conditions, and sometimes a medicine may only be used if extra care is taken. For these reasons, before you start taking an iron supplement it is important that your doctor or pharmacist knows:

- If you have any difficulty swallowing.
- If you are taking any other medicines. This includes any medicines you are taking which are available to buy without a prescription, as well as herbal and complementary medicines.
- If you have ever had an allergic reaction to a medicine



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How to take iron supplements

- Before you start the treatment, read the manufacturer's printed information leaflet from inside the pack. It will give you more information about the iron supplement and will provide you with a full list of the side-effects which you may experience from taking it.
- Iron is absorbed into your bloodstream best if the supplement is taken about an hour before a meal. If, however, you feel queasy after taking iron, having some food in your stomach can help to reduce stomach irritation and feelings of queasiness. So in this case, it may be better for you to take your iron supplement just after a meal.
- Take the iron preparation exactly as your doctor tells you to. You will be told how much to take and how often to take it. Your dose will also be on the label of the pack to remind you. It is usual to be prescribed between 1-3 doses a day. Taking your doses at the same times each day will help you to avoid missing any.
- If you do forget to take a dose, don't worry, just leave out the missed dose and take the next dose when it is due. Do not take two doses together to make up for a forgotten dose.

Getting the most from your treatment

- The length of your course of treatment will depend upon how low your iron levels are. A blood test after a few weeks will show if the treatment is working and your doctor will tell you for how long you should continue to take the iron supplement.
- If you buy any medicines, check with your pharmacist that they are suitable to take with iron supplements. Some medicines (particularly antacids) can interfere with the way iron is absorbed and so should not be taken at the same time.
- Iron supplements can make your stools look darker in colour. This is completely harmless.
- If you suspect that you have taken an overdose of iron, or that someone else (especially if it is a child) might have taken it accidentally, go to the accident and emergency department of your local hospital **straightaway**. This is very important because iron can cause serious problems when it is taken accidentally or in overdose. Take the container with you to show what has been taken, even if the pack is now empty.



Can iron supplements cause problems?

Along with their useful effects, most medicines can cause unwanted side-effects although not everyone experiences them. The table below contains some of the most common ones associated with iron. You will find a full list in the manufacturer's information leaflet supplied with your medicine. The unwanted effects often improve as your body adjusts to the new medicine, but speak with your doctor or pharmacist if any of the following continue or become troublesome.

Common iron side-effects	What can I do if I experience this?
Feeling sick (nausea), stomach pain	Stick to simple foods. If you are not already doing so, take your doses after meals
Constipation	Try to eat a well-balanced diet and drink several glasses of water each day
Diarrhoea	Drink plenty of water to replace lost fluids

If you experience any other symptoms which you think may be due to the medicine, speak with your doctor or pharmacist for further advice.

How to store iron supplements

- Keep all medicines out of the reach and sight of children.
- Store in a cool, dry place, away from direct heat and light.

Important information about all medicines



Important information about all medicines



Never take more than the prescribed dose. If you suspect that you or someone else might have taken an overdose of this medicine, go to the accident and emergency department of your local hospital. Take the container with you, even if it is empty.



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This medicine is for you. Never give it to other people even if their condition appears to be the same as yours.

If you are having an operation or any dental treatment, tell the person carrying out the treatment which medicines you are taking.

Do not keep out-of-date or unwanted medicines. Take them to your local pharmacy which will dispose of them for you.

If you have any questions about this medicine ask your pharmacist.

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Report side effects to a medicine or vaccine

If you experience side effects, you can report them online through the **Yellow Card website** (<https://yellowcard.mhra.gov.uk/>).

✧ Try:

Warfarin + Aspirin

Paracetamol + Naproxen

Paracetamol + Ibuprofen

Enter your medicines below (up to 10)

Frequently asked questions

Can iron supplements make you feel tired?

Iron-deficiency anaemia itself can cause tiredness due to a reduced amount of oxygen being carried around in your body. Iron supplements are used to treat this condition, aiming to alleviate such symptoms. The article does not state that iron supplements directly cause tiredness as a side effect.



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Will iron supplements change the colour of my tongue?

The article mentions that iron supplements can make your stools look darker in colour, which is harmless. However, it does not state that iron supplements will change the colour of your tongue.

How long will I need to take iron supplements?

The length of your course of treatment depends on how low your iron levels are. Your doctor will use a blood test after a few weeks to check if the treatment is working and will advise you on how long you should continue taking the supplement.

What should I do if I forget a dose of my iron supplement?

If you forget to take a dose, you should simply leave out the missed dose and take the next dose when it is due. Do not take two doses together to make up for a forgotten dose.

When is the best time to take an iron tablet?

Iron is best absorbed into your bloodstream if you take the supplement about an hour before a meal. However, if this makes you feel queasy, taking it just after a meal can help reduce stomach irritation and queasiness.

Can I take other medicines with my iron supplement?

It is important to check with your pharmacist if you buy any other medicines to ensure they are suitable to take with iron supplements. Some medicines, particularly antacids, can interfere with how iron is absorbed and should not be taken at the same time.

These questions and answers have been generated from the information in this article.



Further reading and references

- **Manufacturer's PIL, Ferrous sulfate 200 mg Tablets** [ⓘ](http://www.medicines.org.uk/emc/medicine/18081)
(<http://www.medicines.org.uk/emc/medicine/18081>); Accord-UK Ltd, The electronic Medicines Compendium. Dated October 2019.

About the author [View full bio](#)

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Michael is a community pharmacist practicing in the Midlands and South Yorkshire with more than 20 years' experience advising on medicines and medical conditions. He has a strong background in healthcare training, having produced and delivered training courses for pharmacy teams and staff of residential care settings, including nurses. He has also contributed to pharmacy advisory boards for the management of low acuity conditions in the community.

About the reviewer

Sid Dajani

Sultan Dajani qualified at the London School of Pharmacy in 1994 and became the youngest elected member of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society council since its founding in 1842.



Article history

The information on this page is written and peer reviewed by qualified clinicians.

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