Possible side effects of iron tablets

• While side effects occur only in some people, they can be a nuisance. They may include feeling sick (nausea), upset stomach, stomach cramps, constipation and diarrhoea. Side effects often improve or disappear as your body adjusts to the iron tablets. **It is normal for iron tablets to make your stools (faeces) turn black.**

• Tell your doctor if side effects are a problem. Your doctor will advise how to reduce the side effects and also recommend the lowest dose that is needed in your case. When anaemia is present (especially if severe) and iron tablets cannot be tolerated, intravenous iron (through a drip) may be needed. This is usually done in consultation with a specialist (eg haematologist). However, this is rarely needed as the following suggestions are usually effective.

Ways to ease side effects

• If your doctor prescribes more than one iron tablet a day, increase the dose step by step. Take one tablet a day for a few days then increase by one tablet every few days until the prescribed dose is reached. Spread the tablets throughout the day by taking one at a time.

• If constipation is a problem, increasing your daily fluid and fibre intake can help. Discuss it with your doctor who may also suggest a stool (faeces) softener.

Ways to ease side effects continued…

• Taking iron tablets with food reduces side effects but also reduces the amount of iron absorbed. If you need to take your iron tablets with food to reduce stomach upset, it is best to avoid certain foods. The following foods should be avoided for at least 1 hour before & 2 hours after you take iron tablets: milk, cheese, yoghurt, tea, coffee, cocoa/ chocolate, cola, red wine, eggs, cereals & bran.

• Taking iron tablets before bed may reduce stomach upset in some people.

• Trying a different type of iron tablet may help.

• People who cannot tolerate iron tablets each day, can manage tablets less often - such as every second day or once or twice a week. This is still helpful although longer treatment will be needed. Discuss this approach with your doctor to ensure it is suitable in your case.

• There are many iron tablets/ tonics available with only very small amounts of iron in them. This is why they do not cause side effects not because they are more gentle on the stomach. These are generally not suitable and waste money. Discuss alternate tablets with your doctor.

• People who cannot tolerate iron tablets may tolerate iron in syrup form, which can temporarily stain the teeth. Brushing with baking soda will remove the stains. To reduce or help to prevent stains you can: mix each dose in water or fruit juice, take through a straw to help keep the iron liquid from getting on the teeth, place the dose with a dropper well back on the tongue and follow with water.
To give you energy for daily life you need iron

Iron tablets are used in conjunction with increasing iron in your diet. Iron is a vital building block needed by our bodies to make healthy new red blood cells. Red blood cells in our blood stream carry oxygen around our bodies. They contain a red pigment called ‘haemoglobin’.

Anaemia can develop if iron levels fall

- A lack of iron can lead to ‘anaemia’ (medical term for low red blood cell count or haemoglobin). Some people have low iron levels in their body but not low enough to cause anaemia. This is called ‘iron deficiency’ which over time can lead to anaemia if the iron levels fall further. Iron deficiency even without anaemia may cause tiredness.
- When iron levels drop very low there is not enough iron to make new red blood cells resulting in ‘iron deficiency anaemia’. This may cause problems such as tiredness, feeling faint, becoming breathless easily and looking pale.
- Low iron levels and anaemia can be caused by bleeding, a diet low in iron or poor iron uptake from the gut. Heavy menstruation (period) is a common cause of blood loss in women and can lead to low iron levels and anaemia. There are also other possible causes of blood loss, such as bleeding from the gut, which can be silent (the blood may not be seen in the stools/ faeces).

Take iron tablets only as prescribed by a doctor

- There are many other causes of tiredness and of anaemia. Your doctor will assess which causes need to be investigated and will decide if iron tablets should be taken.
- Finding out & treating the cause of bleeding/ low iron levels is very important. This will reduce the amount of iron lost by the body and ensure serious problems are ruled out or treated as soon as possible by your doctor.
- Regular blood tests are important to make sure your body is getting the right amount of iron intake (not too little or too much). It usually takes many months to replace body iron levels (longer if heavy bleeding continues).
- Your doctor will monitor how you are responding, assess what to do if you are not, and advise how long tablets should to be taken.

Taking the right type of iron tablet is essential

- Not taking iron tablets when prescribed or taking tablets without enough iron in them can lead to more severe anaemia and symptoms. In some extreme cases when the anaemia becomes so severe to the point it is not safe to wait for the iron tablets to work, a blood transfusion may be needed.
- Iron tablets in the right dosage can make as much difference as a bag of blood a week naturally in your body (if iron deficiency anaemia is present). Preventing a blood transfusion is usually simple with the right iron treatment.
- If surgery is required, proper attention to low iron levels and anaemia is very important to reduce the chance of needing a blood transfusion.

The best way to take iron tablets

- On an empty stomach (1 hour before or 2 hours after a meal) to increase the amount of iron that is absorbed by the body.
- With a glass of water or fruit juice. Vitamin C, which is found in fruit juices, may increase the amount of iron that is absorbed into the body (Vitamin C is also present in some iron tablets). Do not take them with tea, coffee, cola, cocoa/ chocolate drinks or red wine.
- DO NOT take iron tablets with antacids, calcium tablets or tetracycline antibiotics. Wait at least 2 to 3 hours between taking them (longer if possible). Check other medications with your doctor or pharmacist to see if a gap is needed.
- Swallow capsules and tablets whole. Do not crush or chew them as side effects may be greater.

How to store iron tablets and syrup

- Closed bottle/ container, protected from heat, humidity and bright light
- Keep out of reach of children
- Iron syrup should not be frozen

Best available medical evidence & guidelines (such as from http://www.ironpanel.org.au) were used to write this leaflet along with feedback from Specialists/GPs who treat iron deficiency and anaemia. For more information speak to your doctor. Visit www.healthinsite.gov.au (search for ‘iron’) for additional written information.