

Iron and Iron Deficiency

General 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.

Iron deficiency and iron deficiency anaemia

Each day we normally lose a small amount of iron, which must be replaced from the food we eat to keep the body in balance. Larger amounts of iron are lost if there is bleeding (eg. from periods or silent bleeding from the bowel). If you lose more iron than you take in through food, your body will become low in iron. This is called iron deficiency. If the amount of iron in the body falls even lower, you are not able to make enough new red blood cells. The haemoglobin level then drops below normal. This is known as iron deficiency anaemia.

Treating low body iron levels

The treatment of low body iron levels will depend on the cause, how severe it is & how quickly it needs to be corrected. 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 & iron liquid contain iron at higher levels than food & help to replace iron more quickly. They should only be taken when recommended by your doctor.

Oral Iron – Iron tablets and iron liquid

If you are able to take iron by mouth, this is generally the first option recommended. There are many brands of iron tablets or liquid that can be bought over-the-counter (without a prescription). Many of these do not contain enough iron to make a difference. It is important that you get advice from your doctor about which iron tablets are right for you, how to take them correctly and what the possible side effects are. Please ask your doctor for the 'Guide to taking iron tablets' brochure if this treatment is recommended for you.

Intravenous (IV) Iron

If oral iron is not suitable for you, your doctor may suggest intravenous (IV) iron. IV iron is given directly into a vein through a needle. This is usually given in a hospital, outpatient clinic or medical centre. Uncommon but important side effects include serious allergic reactions and skin staining which can be permanent. Your doctor will talk with you about the risks and benefits of IV iron in your case. Please ask your doctor for the 'Intravenous (IV) iron infusions' brochure if this treatment is recommended for you.

Other Treatments

Intramuscular iron – injection of iron into muscle is not recommended as it is painful and can cause permanent skin scarring and brown staining.

Blood transfusion – this can be lifesaving when severe anaemia or bleeding is present. It carries greater risks than IV iron and should be avoided unless an increase in haemoglobin level is needed right away.

For more information:

Talk to your doctor, nurse, midwife or pharmacist

Patient materials at: www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/bloodorgantissue



This document has been reviewed and endorsed by SQCAG* for consumers and the community – April 2017.

*SA Health Safety and Quality Community Advisory Group.



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