

Oral Iron Treatment in Pregnancy

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Why do I need oral iron treatment during pregnancy?



Our bodies need iron to make haemoglobin. This part of a red blood cell carries oxygen around your body. Iron 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 everyday activities. When pregnant, iron is essential for your baby's growth and development. Ensuring adequate iron intake is also crucial to prepare for possible blood loss during childbirth and promote a speedy recovery.

Oral iron treatment is recommended once you have been diagnosed with iron deficiency (low ferritin) and/or iron deficiency anaemia (low ferritin and low haemoglobin). It is now not possible for your diet alone to supply enough iron to meet your body's needs.

This factsheet explains the use of oral iron treatments in pregnancy and how to take them for the best effect.

Only commence oral iron after a discussion with your doctor or midwife. If you have a history of gastrointestinal disease or surgery like inflammatory bowel disease, coeliac disease, or gastric bypass surgery please inform your doctor or midwife. Oral iron may not be a suitable treatment for you.

Ferrous or ferric iron preparations?

There are two types of iron salts in oral iron treatments: ferrous and ferric iron. Treatments that contain 'ferrous iron' are the first choice for treatment. If ferrous iron is not suitable then 'ferric iron' formulas are considered.

What dose of oral iron do I need?

Check the label to see how much elemental iron it contains. Elemental iron is the amount of actual iron in the preparation. Generally, doses between 65 and 100mg of elemental iron are best. Your body may not absorb higher doses of iron and excess iron can contribute to belly and bowel upset.

For how long do I need to take oral iron?

It takes two weeks for your body to absorb oral iron and produce more red blood cells. A rise in your haemoglobin (Hb) shows this. It takes up to three months to build up your body's total storage of iron again. So, take your oral iron up until three months after your haemoglobin is normalised and/or up to six weeks after your baby is born.

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Which iron treatment is best?

When comparing the content of oral iron treatments those treatments made from 'ferrous iron' are superior. This is because there is better uptake of ferrous iron by your body. Of these, the 'ferrous fumarate' formulas provide the best response and are best tolerated. Oral iron made from 'ferric iron' is gentler on your stomach. Yet, it may not improve your blood iron levels like other oral iron treatments.

Oral iron treatments are also manufactured in different forms. Tablets and capsules provide a better strength of iron than liquids. If liquids are instead chosen, the dose must be correct. For example, measure liquid iron using a syringe. Also, use a straw to avoid staining your teeth.

The table below provides a summary of oral iron treatments made from ferrous and ferric iron salts.

Ferrous Iron	Ferric Iron
Brands Ferrous fumarate preparations are: Ferro-F-Tab 100mg,* Ferro-Tab 65.7mg,* Ferropods 100mg* Ferrous sulfate preparations are: Ferro-grad 105mg,* Ferro-grad C 105mg,* Fefol 87.4mg,* FGF 80mg,* Ferro-Liquid 6mg/ml*	Brands Maltofer 100mg* Maltofer Syrup 50mg/ml*
Summary of action First choice for treatment Better absorbed Good uptake into the gut & body Ferrous fumarate preparations provide better absorption and tolerance	Summary of action Recommended if ferrous iron is not appropriate or not tolerated Absorption can be less effective Uptake into the body can be slow Gentle on the stomach and well tolerated
How often to take Take on alternate days or daily Do not take more than one a day	How often to take Take daily or twice daily Can increase up to 2 tablets a day
How to take ferrous iron preparations Take on an empty stomach with a glass of water or juice, OR Take 1 hour before a meal, OR Take 2 hours or more after meals or other medications Do not take it with tea, coffee, milk, cocoa, cola, or wine Do not suck, chew or break tablets/capsules	How to take ferric iron preparations Best taken during or immediately after a meal Can take with other medications Tablets to be swallowed whole Liquid iron can be mixed with fruit or vegetable juice

*Amount of elemental iron

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Can I use multivitamins?

Most multivitamins do not have enough iron to treat iron deficiency or anaemia. The combination of other vitamins and minerals can also interfere with iron absorption. Therefore, it is best not to continue taking multivitamins.

Can I take oral iron with other medications?

Ferrous iron tablets should not be taken with other medications. It can interact with antacids like Mylanta and Gaviscon, proton pump inhibitors like Omeprazole, calcium tablets, thyroxine, methyldopa, and some antibiotics. This reduces the effect of iron and/or the effects of these medications.

Are there side effects?

Some women experience nausea, diarrhoea, or constipation. These usually improve as your body gets used to oral iron. It is also normal for iron tablets to make your stools (poo) turn black. Please inform your midwife or doctor if your side effects do not improve, as you may need to change your treatment.

How can I manage the side effects?

1. Take your oral iron at night
2. Reduce the frequency from daily to every second day
3. Reduce your dose to a lower strength
4. Drink plenty of water throughout the day
5. Increase your intake of fibre
(fruit, vegetables, grains, nuts, and cereals)
6. Take mild laxatives like Metamucil, Movicol or Coloxyl
7. Take your oral iron with food
8. Change to another oral iron treatment, as recommended by your doctor or midwife

Do I need any follow-up checks?

It is important to know whether your body is responding to your treatment. This is done by taking a blood test after you start oral iron. Have your blood checked two to four weeks after you have started treatment. Your doctor or midwife will order the blood test and will discuss the results with you.

If you have any further questions, please speak with your midwife or doctor.

Iron tablets, like all medicines, should be kept in a locked cupboard out of reach and sight of children. A small amount can be poisonous in infants and young children. If a child accidentally takes iron, call the Poisons Information Centre immediately on 131126.

Endorsed 24/5/23. Reviewed by consumers in development stage. Should you wish to discuss any aspect of this information please send an email RHWfeedback@health.nsw.gov.au