Hinchingbrooke Health Care NHS
NHS Trust

What you need to know about iron treatment

Patient information

What is iron and why do I need it?

Iron is a metallic element essential for many processes in the body. Our bodies contain around three to four grams of iron and most of this is used for making the red blood cells. These are responsible for carrying oxygen around the body. If there is a lack of iron, anaemia (a reduction in the number of oxygen carrying red cells) will develop.

What causes iron deficiency?

Loss of iron from the body	Due to bleeding
A lack of iron in the diet	This mainly occurs in children and is uncommon in adults as a cause of iron deficiency anaemia
An increased need for iron	This can arise when a large amount of cell divisions occur, such as during pregnancy, and during periods of rapid childhood growth.
Reduced absorption of iron in the intestine	This can be caused by diseases of the small intestine, such as gluten intolerance (coeliac disease)

Symptoms of iron deficiency anaemia

Most of us feel tired and listless with a lack of energy and this is often normal in our busy lives, however these symptoms can also be the symptoms of iron deficiency anaemia.

Other symptoms include

- Shortness of breath, especially on exertion
- Poor concentration
- Poor appetite
- Muscle weakness
- An increased susceptibility to colds and infection.

How is iron given?

By mouth (orally) - Increasing dietary iron is the best way to get more iron on board. Foods high in iron are **red meat** and **liver** (liver must not be eaten during pregnancy due to the high levels of vitamin A). When this is not possible an oral iron supplement is given. There are several oral iron supplements available e.g. ferrous sulphate, ferrous fumarate. There is little evidence to distinguish between these types. It is largely a case of finding the most suitable for the individual and as a result you may be given a different preparation if you are intolerant to one.

Some people experience problems with their bowels when taking some iron supplements. This may necessitate change of preparation or an alternative method of administration

As an injection – If oral iron is not tolerated it is possible to give iron as a drip into a vein (intravenous infusion, IV or 'drip') or as an injection into a muscle. Your doctor will discuss the most appropriate treatment for you. The dose of iron will depend on factors such as your current iron levels and your weight.

What does having injectable iron involve?

As a drip – You will need to come to the hospital for your IV iron. A cannula (needle) will be inserted in your arm. The drip will be connected to the needle and the infusion given. On your first visit you will receive a 'test dose' to monitor you for any potential side effects of the drug. You will have your temperature pulse and blood pressure monitored prior to, during and after the treatment. Some people require just one infusion others are required to have regular doses, this depends on why you have low iron and your doctor or nurse will discuss this with you.

As an injection into the muscle – this involves a number of visits to the hospital. The injection is usually administered into the bottom; only certain types of iron can be given this way.

Side effects of treatment

Various side effects are possible with intravenous and intramuscular iron (as with all drugs), these can include:

- A metallic taste in the mouth
- Headache
- Feeling sick
- Itching
- Stomach upset
- Drop in blood pressure.

Very rarely patients have experienced more severe reactions to IV iron including anaphylaxis (severe allergy). These side effects are rare, but please discuss any concerns with your nurse/doctor.