

Take Care with Iron Supplements – “Too Much of a Good Thing” Can be Dangerous!

Our bodies need iron to build red blood cells and to stay healthy. Most of us are able to take in the amount of iron our bodies need from the food we eat, but in some cases, your doctor may tell you that you need to take an iron supplement. This can occur when you have a condition called anemia (sometimes called “low blood”). It is important to be sure you are taking the right amount of iron. Even though our bodies need iron to stay healthy, taking too much can be dangerous.

Iron products have names like ferrous gluconate, ferrous sulfate, and ferrous fumarate. Different products contain different amounts of iron. For example:

- a 300 mg tablet of ferrous gluconate contains 35 mg of iron,
- a 300 mg tablet of ferrous sulfate contains 60 mg of iron, and
- a 300 mg tablet of ferrous fumarate contains 99 mg of iron.

Sometimes, when doctors write prescriptions for iron products, they describe the dose using the weight of the product instead of the amount of iron. This can get confusing for consumers. If your doctor tells you to take 300 mg of ferrous sulfate daily, but the label says only that each tablet contains 60 mg of iron, will you know how many tablets to take? It is important that you know exactly how much iron (also called “elemental iron”) your doctor wants you to take each day.

Canadian regulations are changing, and you might find products containing high doses of iron on the shelves of health food or natural product stores. It is important to be well-informed if you are buying an iron product without the help of a pharmacist. It is also important to remember that children sometimes mistake medicines such as chewable iron tablets for candy. Iron products can be very dangerous for children.

Here is ISMP Canada’s advice to help prevent iron overdoses:

- Do not take more than the recommended daily allowance of iron without consulting your doctor.
- If your doctor prescribes iron for you, be sure that you understand the amount of iron your doctor intends for you to take.
- Ask your pharmacist to help you select the right iron product and to provide instructions on the correct dose to take.
- Keep all medications, including iron products, in a safe place, out of reach of children. (Do not rely on “childproof” caps, as children can sometimes open them.)
- If a child in your care accidentally eats or drinks an iron product, call your local Poison Control Centre or seek immediate emergency care for the child.
- If you are using a liquid iron product, be sure to measure the exact dose as prescribed, using the measuring spoon or dropper provided with the product.
- If you are taking an iron product and have any of the symptoms of iron overdose (for example; nausea, vomiting, diarrhea and stomach pains) call your doctor immediately.