



healthcare for the whole family

Iron Indecision

Q: I am 35 years old and feeling tired. How do I know if I need to take an iron supplement?

A: Iron is used in the body to transport oxygen in the blood. This is why when you don't have enough iron you can feel tired and run down. The only way to know if you need more iron is through blood tests. These tests can include a CBC (complete blood count) and a serum ferritin. The CBC will tell you if you are anemic (iron or B12/folic acid deficient) by looking at the size of the red blood cells. If your red blood cells are small you need to supplement with iron. Serum ferritin will tell you what your iron stores are. Meat is the best food source of iron. This is the heme form. The body only absorbs 1% to 7% of the nonheme form found in vegetables when they are consumed by themselves. Iron rich vegetables may include: wholegrain cereals and flours, leafy green vegetables, blackstrap molasses, lentils, and kidney beans. To improve your iron absorption, supplement your diet with Vitamin C. I recommend taking 100mg with your iron supplement. When taking an iron supplement avoid taking black teas, chocolate, calcium, dairy, nuts and high fibre. These will all decrease the absorption of iron. You do not need to avoid these foods or supplements completely, just do not take them at the same time as your iron. I recommend to all my patients not to take an iron supplement unless you have your blood checked first as it is NOT a supplement everyone should be taking.