



Sage Hill Pediatrics

FAMILY WELLNESS WITH A PERSONAL TOUCH

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As professionals, we value nutrition and exercise in our personal lives, and we commonly discuss this theme during office visits. We also enjoy working with the practical and behavioral aspects of Pediatrics, ie. getting your kids to do what you already know they need to do.

-Ed.

All About Iron Deficiency and Iron Supplements (Also known as “Doc, my kid won't take the iron medicine”)

Prevention

Clearly, prevention is the preferred strategy, but even if your child already has an iron deficiency, now is the time to change the dietary habits that allowed it to creep in. Most iron-deficiency in children stems from a poor quality diet. In developed countries, the single biggest offender is milk: Children who consume more than three servings of dairy each day develop inflammation in the colon that causes them to *lose* iron. Also, as a general rule, the fewer vegetables and the more processed foods a child eats, the more likely he or she is to develop a deficiency of iron or other nutrients.

Dietary Sources of Iron

Many healthy foods are rich sources of iron. It's never too late to shore up on iron-rich foods, even if an iron deficiency has already been diagnosed.

Blackstrap molasses

- Very sweet! Use as a sugar alternative
- Probably the best kept secret in iron-rich foods

Meats

- Lean red meats
- Chicken
- Turkey
- Liver
- Beef

Iron-fortified whole grains

- Cereals
- Breads
- Rice

Tofu

Nuts

Egg yolks

Seafood

- Oysters
- Clams
- Tuna
- Salmon
- Shrimp

Beans

- Kidney
- Lima
- Navy
- Black
- Pinto
- Soy
- Lentils

Dried fruits

- Raisins
- Prunes
- Dates
- Apricots

Gerber Graduates (iron-fortified)

- Rice cereal
- Oatmeal

Greens and vegetables

- Collard greens
- Kale
- Mustard greens
- Spinach
- Turnip Greens
- Broccoli
- Parsley
- Asparagus
- Swiss chard (A sweet-tasting root vegetable, in the same family as beets)
- Watercress
- Brussel sprouts

Anything cooked in an iron-skillet

Note: You can puree many of these and sneak them into tomato sauce or your child's favorite smoothie.

Iron Deficiency

Iron-deficiency is a common but potentially serious condition that can compromise growth of body and brain, alike. By the time an iron deficiency is diagnosed, large quantities of iron are usually needed to replenish iron stores. Typically this comes in the form a concentrated liquid. No matter how you slice it, iron tastes like iron—strongly metallic, quite distasteful. Most normal adults don't like the taste, and virtually all children feel the same way. If your child is the finicky type, you can avoid a knock-down drag-out over the medicine by planning ahead. Below is a compilation of useful things you might want to know about the art and skill of giving iron supplements—and about how to feed your entire family a diet plentiful in iron, year-round. Remember this critical point: your child's *first experience* taking a medicine sets the stage for compliance or protest at future doses. With iron supplements, execution of the first dose is crucial. This is the time to employ all of your tricks, and to pull out all the stops.

Afraid your child will refuse the medicine? Strategy #1: Peer Pressure

Little ones want to be just like their older siblings. Have an older sibling take a multi-vitamin, or something that looks like medicine, at the same time. Ideally, find something the older child is really supposed to be taking anyway. If you use a “pretend” medicine, make sure older children understand that *real* medicines should never be taken unless a responsible adult says so.

Strategy #2: Disguise It

I call this the “Mary Poppins Principle” (“Just a spoon-full of sugar...”), and I hold it should be reserved for medicines that are notoriously tough to convince children to take—like this one.

- Add it to dessert. Make sure your child doesn't see you do it! Add it to the smallest amount of dessert that you can be confident will cover up the taste of the iron.
- Ask your local pharmacist if they can add flavorings. Don't expect miracles, but flavoring can help.
- Mix it with honey, purple grape juice, or chocolate syrup (my personal favorite --Editor)
- If dosing with a syringe, *dip the syringe tip in chocolate syrup*. Do this the *very first time* you give the medicine, and scoop up as much chocolate as you can. Your child's first impression will be the taste of chocolate, and he or she will usually keep swallowing until the medicine is down.

Even if your child makes the experience difficult, try to always give iron medication with a smile. Your positive attitude will ultimately prevail.

Serve With Orange Juice (Not Milk)

Vitamin C helps the body absorb iron, *but cow's milk and dairy products interfere with absorption*. Things like orange juice and chewable Vitamin C tablets certainly do 'help the medicine go down', but remember that orange juice is high in calories, and supplements are not a complete substitute for the healthy natural foods that contain Vitamin C. Foods high in Vitamin C are citrus fruits (grapefruit, oranges, tangerines), bell peppers, dark leafy greens, kiwi, broccoli, berries, tomatoes, peas, and papaya.

The Teeth, The Teeth...

A parting word of caution: If iron supplements have prolonged contact with the teeth, they can leave a gray discoloration. The longer the contact, the more likely staining will occur. Most commonly, it becomes an issue when a child fights taking the medicine, since it tends to sit in their mouth until they finally swallow it. The discoloration is benign (whereas iron deficiency definitely is *not* benign), but it can last. I uncovered two strategies to prevent staining:

- If feasible, give the medicine with a straw. (This approach also allows kids to avoid the taste, somewhat.)
- Straw or no straw, brush teeth immediately after giving the medicine.

Finally, be aware that iron stains clothes, as well. A bib may be in order.

This information is meant to serve as a guide and reference, not as a replacement for medical advice delivered to you by a qualified healthcare professional.