

## Iron Pills Can Harm

Many people remember the old "tired blood" advertising claims and still believe that iron pills will help if you suffer from chronic fatigue. You should not take iron pills without a specific diagnosis. Several studies have shown that iron deficiency can be healthful. Before the bad LDL cholesterol can form plaques in arteries, it must be converted to oxidized LDL and iron causes this reaction. Lack of iron reduces your chances of forming plaques in your arteries and suffering heart attacks and strokes. Less than 50 percent of the iron in your body is in your red blood cells. Most iron is in your iron reserves in your liver, spleen and other tissues. Your body needs iron to make red blood cells and if your body does not contain enough iron, you will become anemic, but you will not become anemic until you have depleted all your iron reserves. You can be iron deficient but not anemic when you have an adequate supply of red blood cells, but no iron reserves. Iron deficiency does not make you tired unless you are also anemic, but it can tire athletes exercising at their maximum. Blood iron levels are part of routine blood tests. If your blood iron levels are low and you are not anemic, you need a special test called ferritin to measure iron reserves. If your ferritin is low, your doctor will look for a source of bleeding such as heavy menstruation or bleeding in the intestinal tract. If no serious source is found, you need no treatment unless you are a highly competitive athlete. Your body has no way to rid itself of excess iron, so it is stored in body tissues, especially the liver, heart, and pancreas. Hemochromatosis is an inherited disorder that causes the body to absorb and store too much iron. It is not common and is easily treated by donating blood, but undiagnosed, it can lead to severe organ damage. This is just one more reason why you should not take iron pills without a specific diagnosis.

## About the Author

These weekly columns offer the latest information on issues related to food safety, food and nutrition, and healthy.

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