

TITLE 1: "Ask the Doctor"

TITLE 2:

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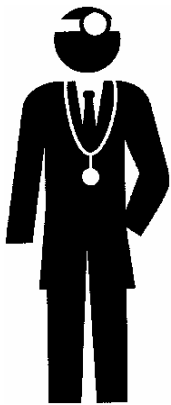
KEYWORDS:

- Iron

ABSTRACT OVERVIEW: One reader asks about iron pills and when the best time to take them is.

COPY OF ARTICLE:

Q. *My doctor told me to take iron pills to help my restless legs and said I should take it before I eat, but the instructions with the pills say take after a meal and the pharmacist says the same thing. I tried both ways and didn't notice any difference except I find it easier to remember to take them after a meal.... So does it really make any difference which way I take them?*



A. The major problem with oral iron is the absorption at the gut is so limited that very little of what you take orally makes it into the blood stream. This can be as little as 10% of the amount you take orally. There are two things you can do to increase the amount absorbed. First also take a low dose of vitamin C (200 mg should suffice). Second, try taking the pills on an empty stomach and wait about 30 minutes to an hour before eating. The empty stomach may significantly increase the amount of iron reaching the blood. The problem with this approach is that some people experience stomach problems from the iron pills. If this happens it is often reduced by taking the pills on a full stomach or at least not on an empty stomach. Thus if you did have stomach problems with taking the iron you should try taking them very shortly after eating. It sounds as if this person did not have these problems so

the option of taking the iron pills 30 to 60 minutes before eating or a couple of hours after eating is available and may improve the absorption of the iron and the benefits from it. The issue of remembering to take the pills is also worth considering. It is probably always better to take the pills even at the wrong time then not take them at all. Absorption of iron into the blood from pills left in the pill box is very close to 0%, so you cannot do worse than not taking them. When taking iron pills you should discuss all three of these issue with your doctor and follow his recommendations. That is, ask him about: 1. Taking vitamin C with the pills, 2. Taking the medication on an empty vs. full stomach and

3. Scheduling the time for taking the pills so that you remember to take them. You should also ask him about when he wants repeated blood tests to ensure you are not having any problems from taking the iron pills. These have been recommended to be done after a few weeks on the pills and every few months after that.

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