Iron is magical

The summer before my senior year in high school, I couldn't make it through a day without a nap. I remember laying down for a snooze most afternoons in the pool of sunshine coming through my living room window. I was just so tired all the time. And I felt like I was horribly out of shape even though I was running six days a week to get ready for cross country season.

That summer, I attended a cross country camp for high school athletes put on by Patrick Shane, the head women's cross country at Brigham Young University. In one of his talks, he spoke of the importance of getting your ferratin iron level checked. He said that runners want their ferratin level to be above 40, and when it dips into the 30's, it's like the yellow light going on in a gas tank. Anything below 30 will cause running performance to suffer. (Recently, I've been hearing coaches and athletes say a competitive runner's ferratin level should be even higher, ideally in the 80-100 range.)

When I got home, I visited my doctor to get my ferratin level checked. It was a dismal 6! I immediately started taking iron supplements per my doctors instructions. After a month, I had my ferratin level checked again, and I was up to 26. I felt like a totally different runner. I had a new running gear I'd forgotten I had, and I felt amazing. I ran faster and stronger as a result of increasing my ferratin level, and I had an excellent senior cross country season.

Since high school, I have consistently monitored my iron levels. In college, taking liquid ferrous sulfate with orange juice on an empty stomach (usually about 30 minutes before breakfast), kept my ferratin levels regularly at 50-100. Since college, I've been as low as 10 and as high as 70. When my ferratin is high, I run fast, strong, and love running. There aren't words for how good this feels. When my ferratin gets low, I feel like my asthma is coming back, I'm tired all the time, and my body just kind of hurts when I run.

A few best practices related to monitoring your iron level:

1. Ask your doctor for a ferratin iron test (in addition to the CBC test they'll probably run).
2. When they get the result, ask for the actual number. "Normal" ferratin ranges from 12-300 nanograms per milliliter of blood (ng/mL). If you have a ferratin of 13, some offices might tell you your ferratin is "low normal", when in fact, that is very low and is hurting your running performance, and likely your level of energy just functioning throughout the day.
3. Ideally, you want your ferratin level to be 50+. I'm even hearing some coaches and athletes currently recommend ferratin levels of 80-100 for optimal performance.
4. If your ferratin is low, begin eating iron rich foods like beef and add some supplements. Obviously, talk to your doctor about the amount of iron he or she recommends.

5. I recommend starting with a low dose to see how your body reacts, and then gently work your way up to the ideal dose recommended by your doctor. Two of my friends had very uncomfortable reactions when they took an initial large dose of an iron supplement.
6. My favorite iron supplement is liquid ferrous sulfate (available on Amazon or at most pharmacies behind the counter). Yes, it's nasty, and I have to chuck it down my throat and brush my teeth after to make sure it doesn't stain my teeth, but taken with 500mg of Vitamin C, this supplement rockets up my ferratin iron level better than anything I've tried. Other supplements I've tried that work well and are popular with my running friends include Blood Builder by Megafood; Hema-Plex by Nature's Plus; and Ferrasorb by Thorne Research.
7. Side note: Iron can be constipating, which is not fun. However, the supplements above have not caused problems for me.
8. Take iron with a source of Vitamin C, like orange juice, fruit, or a vitamin. Recently I've found I absorb iron best when I take it with 500mg of Vitamin C.
9. Take it on an empty stomach if you can tolerate it for best absorption. For me, taking it first thing in the morning and waiting 30 minutes before breakfast works well, or taking it right after a run when my stomach is empty anyway. (Note: This article recommends **not** taking iron supplements in the six hours following a hard workout if you're going for optimal absorption.)
10. Avoid sources of Calcium close to your iron supplements. Calcium blocks iron absorption.
11. Re-check your iron after a month or two to see if your supplement regimen is working.
12. One last note – taking iron perfectly can feel really high-maintenance. (Take iron on an empty stomach, take with Vitamin C, avoid Calcium, not after hard workouts, etc.) My personal opinion is that it's better to take iron imperfectly than to not take it at all. If you need it, get it in one way or another. If you get re-checked and your iron levels are still sub-par, be more diligent about taking it as recommended.

The feeling of increasing your iron levels if you've been low feels amazing, magical even. It will improve your running! Get it checked. Keep it up. Run healthy and happy.

What has been your experience with iron? I'd love to hear about it. Share your experience by posting a comment below.