Iron and Restless Legs: Your Iron Plan

What to test, what the numbers mean, and how to take iron for restless legs syndrome (RLS)

WHY IRON COMES FIRST

Low iron in the brain is the most important treatable cause of RLS symptoms. The brain uses iron to make dopamine, a chemical messenger that helps control movement. Brain iron can be low even when routine blood tests look normal, so we use higher iron targets for RLS than for anemia. Correcting iron can greatly reduce symptoms in many people.

BEFORE YOUR BLOOD TEST

- ☐ Have blood drawn in the morning, before eating.
- ☐ Stop iron pills 2 days before the test. A recent dose can make the results look better than they are.
- ☐ Ask for the full panel: **ferritin** (stored iron), serum iron, total iron-binding capacity, and **transferrin saturation** (TSAT, how full the blood's iron carrier is).
- ☐ Mention any recent infection or inflammation. Ferritin rises with both and can look falsely reassuring.

WHAT YOUR RESULTS USUALLY MEAN

Your result	What it usually means for RLS
Ferritin 75 or lower, or TSAT under 20%	Iron treatment is recommended. Iron by mouth is the usual first step.
Ferritin 75 to 300, and TSAT under 45%	IV iron (iron given through a vein) may be considered for ongoing RLS. Guidelines differ on the upper limit.*
TSAT above 45%	No iron. Your clinician may test for hemochromatosis, an inherited iron-overload condition.

These ranges are for adults; children, pregnancy and kidney disease follow different rules. Ferritin in mcg/L, the same as ng/mL. *The 2025 American Academy of Sleep Medicine (AASM) guideline uses ferritin 75 to 100 for IV iron; the 2026 *Mayo Clinic Proceedings* RLS algorithm extends it to 300.

TAKING IRON BY MOUTH

- About 65 mg of elemental iron per dose, for example ferrous sulfate 325 mg.
- **Every other day** often works better than every day. One dose blunts absorption of the next for up to 2 days.
- An evening dose may work better for RLS.
- Take it 2 hours apart from food, calcium, magnesium, coffee and tea. Adding 100 to 200 mg of vitamin C helps absorption.
- Constipation or nausea? Taking it with food is an acceptable trade.
- Plan a recheck of iron levels and symptoms in about 3 months.

IF YOU NEED IV IRON

IV iron raises iron stores quickly and works well for many people, especially when pills are not absorbed or tolerated, or after 3 months of pills without enough improvement. It is usually given at an infusion center. The benefit often takes 6 to 8 weeks to appear, so other RLS treatment may continue in the meantime.

Do not start iron on your own. Too much iron is harmful. Take iron for RLS only after blood testing and with a plan from your clinician.

My iron plan

Test date: _____ Ferritin: _____ TSAT: _____ %

Iron: _____ How often: _____

Recheck by: _____ Questions? Call: _____

Scan for the full guide and an 8-minute video

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