



IWK Health

Iron in your Diet

Iron helps blood carry oxygen through our bodies. Some people need more iron than others. These include: babies, teenagers, athletes, vegetarians, those who are having periods or pregnant individuals.

If you don't consume enough iron you may:

- feel tired, low in energy, weak or dizzy
- find it hard to concentrate and learn
- be more irritable (cranky, fussy)
- gain weight too slowly (infants)
- get sick more often
- have pale skin
- feel short of breath

When iron levels become too low you can develop a condition called iron deficiency anemia. This can lead to serious health issues such as weakness, fatigue, difficulty concentrating, impaired brain function and immune function.

Iron in Foods

Iron that comes from meat and seafood is called heme iron. Our bodies absorb this type of iron the best. Iron that comes from plants and eggs is called non-heme iron. Vegetarians may need two times more iron than non-vegetarians. This is because heme iron from meat is absorbed better than non-heme iron from plants and eggs.

Maximize Iron Absorption

The body will absorb more iron from plant foods when they are eaten with meat, fish or poultry. For example:

- eat pasta with meat sauce
- add nuts to chicken stir-fry
- add beans, peas or lentils to soups, stews, salads, casseroles, burritos, fajitas and spaghetti sauce.

If you are vegetarian - Eat iron rich foods and vitamin C rich foods at the same time to increase iron absorption.

What foods provide Vitamin C?

Fruits and vegetables are the best sources of vitamin C.

- Citrus fruits (such as oranges and grapefruit) and their juices, as well as red and green pepper and kiwifruit, have a lot of vitamin C.
- Other fruits and vegetables—such as broccoli, strawberries, cantaloupe, baked potatoes, and tomatoes—also are good sources of vitamin C.

Foods that can decrease iron absorption

- High calcium foods including dairy and fortified milk alternatives like soy/rice beverage. Avoid having too much. Two to three cups daily is a good amount for children over 1 year old.
- Coffee and tea can also decrease iron absorption. Avoid these when eating foods with iron.

High Iron meal and snack ideas

- Iron fortified cereal with less than 5 grams of sugar and 30% daily value (DV) for iron. Try Multigrain Cheerios®
- Lower sugar instant oatmeal or cream of wheat. Add nuts, seeds or wheat germ to boost iron even more.
- High iron dishes for like chili (meat or vegetarian), clam chowder, beef or lentil stew or baked beans with molasses or tomatoes.
- Keep lentils or black beans on hand to put in soups, stews, burritos, wraps, tacos, salads or add to baked potatoes.
- Homemade trail mix including pepitas (pumpkin seeds) and dried fruit like raisins and apricots. Sprinkle nuts and seeds on salads, cereal or when baking.
- Use extra firm tofu in stir-fry, hot and sour soup, Sheppard's pie, and pasta sauces. Use silken tofu in fruit smoothies.
- Add canned sardines or oysters to toast with mustard. Use them to make fish cakes or add to mashed potatoes.
- Have prune juice to boost your iron and improve bowel health if you find iron supplements constipating.

Food Sources of Iron

Food	Iron (mg)	Food	Iron (mg)
Chicken liver 3 oz	9	Swiss chard, ½ cup	2
Oysters, 3 oz	8	Firm tofu, ⅓ cup	2
Dark chocolate (45%–69%), 3 oz	7	Molasses cookies, 2 small	2
Liver pate, 3 oz	7	Edamame, ½ cup	2
Oatmeal Crisp®, ¾ cup	6.5	Barley, cooked, 1 cup	2
Raisin Bran®, ¾ cup	6	Couscous, cooked, 1 cup	2
Pumpkin seeds, ¼ cup	5	Molasses, 2 TBSP	2
Shreddies®, ¾ cup	5	Canned beets, ½ cup	1.5
Beef liver, 3 oz	5	Almonds, ¼ cup	1.5
Soybeans, ½ cup	4.5	Wheat germ, 2 TBSP	1.5
Mini Wheats®, ¾ cup	4.5	Hummus, ¼ cup	1.5
White beans, cooked/canned ½ cup	4	Instant oatmeal, 1 pack	1.5
Beef kidney or heart, 3 oz	4	Dried apricots, 3 pieces	1.5
Corn Bran Squares®, ¾ cup	3.5	Prune juice, ½ cup	1.5
Cooked spinach, ½ cup	3.5	Pistachios, ¼ cup	1.5
Quinoa, cooked, 1 cup	3.5	Sunflower seeds, ¼ cup	1.5
Cream of Wheat®, ¾ cup	3	Turkey, dark meat and skin, 3 oz	1.5
Cheerios®, ¾ cup	3	Lima beans, ½ cup	1
Baked beans with pork, ¾ cup	3	Split peas, ½ cup	1
Lentils, cooked/canned, ½ cup	3	Lamb, 3oz	1
Bran muffin from mix, 1 medium	3	Bean sprouts, ½ cup	1
Clams, 3 oz	2.5	Pinto beans, cooked/canned ½ cup	1
Sesame seeds, ¼ cup	2.5	Green peas, boiled, ½ cup	1
Navy beans, cooked/canned, ½ cup	2.5	Chicken, dark meat and skin, 3 oz	1
Pasta, egg noodles, cooked 1 cup	2.5	Bread, 1 slice	1
Snow crab, ½ cup	2	Raisins, ¼ cup	1
Kidney beans, cooked/canned, ½ cup	2	Tuna, 3 oz	1
Sardines, 3 oz	2	Broccoli, ½ cup	1
Chickpeas, cooked/canned, ½ cup	2	Egg, 1	1
Stewed tomato, ½ cup	2	Silken tofu, ⅓ cup	1
Beef, 3 oz	2	Ham, 3 oz	1
Potato with skin, medium	2	Brussels sprouts, 6	1
Cashews, ¼ cup	2	Raw spinach, 1 cup chopped	1

Conversions	1 cup = 250mL ¾ cup = 175mL ½ cup = 125mL	⅓ cup = 80mL ½ cup = 60mL	2 TBSP = 30mL 3oz = 90g
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Iron and Pregnancy

During pregnancy, you need about one third more iron. Getting enough iron is as important as taking a prenatal multivitamin. Iron will help ensure your baby is born with good iron stores and at a healthy weight. It will also help you feel well during and after your pregnancy.

Babies and Iron

For the first 6 months, breastfed babies will get the iron they need from breastmilk. Formula fed babies should receive iron fortified infant formula until 9-12 months of age. Babies 6 months and older should be offered iron rich foods every day. Iron fortified baby cereals, beef, lamb, poultry, tofu, beans and other legumes and eggs are good sources of iron. Talk to your doctor or dietitian if your child is over 6 months and is not eating any meat or other iron rich foods.

Treat Iron Supplements like a Medication

Sometimes people need iron supplements but it is important to speak with a doctor, dietitian or pharmacist before starting. Keep iron supplements away from children as they can be dangerous.

Daily Iron Needs

Ages	Daily Iron Needs (mg)
0 to 6 months	0.27
7-12 months	11
1-3 years	7
4-8 years	10
9-13 years	8
Female 14-18 years	15
Male 14-18 years	11

Ages	Daily Iron Needs (mg)
Female 19-50 years	18
Male 19-50 years	8
Adults over 51	8
Pregnant Women	27
Breastfeeding 18 years or younger	10
Breastfeeding 19 years and over	9

References:

- Health Canada. Canadian Nutrient File. Accessed April 22, 2020
- National Institutes of Health. Iron-Health Professional Fact Sheet. Accessed April 21, 2020
- PEN Nutrition. Food Sources of Iron. Accessed April 21, 2020
- Pediatric Nutrition Care Manual. Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. Accessed April 21, 2020

**Please, no scented products or fragrances at the IWK. / * SVP, pas de produits parfumés ou des parfums à l'IWK.*
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