



Iron and Your Health

Why is iron important?

Iron is a mineral and important for good health. It helps carry oxygen to all parts of the body. Without enough iron, you may get tired and sick more easily. Babies and children need iron for healthy growth and development. Iron is also important for brain development.

How much iron do I need?

The amount of iron you need depends on your age and gender. On average, you can aim for the Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA) or daily amount:

Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA) for Iron (Daily)		
Age (years)	Male (mg)	Female (mg)
1-3	7	7
4-8	10	10
9-13	8	8
14-18	11	15
19-49	8	18
Over 50	8	8
Pregnancy	/	27
Breast-feeding under 19	/	10
Breast-feeding 19-50	/	9

If you are pregnant, your iron needs change. Pregnant women need more iron and should choose iron-rich foods every day. Take a daily multivitamin/mineral supplement with 16 to 20 mg of iron if you are pregnant. Some women may need more iron than others. Talk to your doctor to find out how much iron is right for you.

How do babies get enough iron?

Breast milk is the only food babies need until 6 months of age, and it is recommended for babies up to 2 years of age and older. The iron in breast milk is very well absorbed. Babies who are not breastfed should receive iron-fortified infant

formula from birth until 9 to 12 months of age. You should also include iron-rich solid foods in your baby's diet every day starting at 6 months of age. These include iron-fortified infant cereal, well-cooked finely minced meat, poultry or fish, egg, lentils, beans, or tofu. If your family is vegetarian, talk with a registered dietitian to make sure your baby gets enough iron. For more information, see HealthLink BC File [#69c Baby's First Foods](#).

Do some people need even more iron?

The following people may need more iron than the RDA: vegetarians, frequent blood donors, endurance athletes, and women older than 50 years who still menstruate. Talk to your doctor if you are concerned that you do not get enough iron.

Vegetarians need more iron in their diets. The iron from plant foods is not absorbed by the body as well as from animal foods, so vegetarians are at greater risk of iron deficiency. Vegetarians who are pregnant women, adolescents, and endurance athletes are at highest risk.

Vegetarians should choose several iron-rich plant foods daily.

Iron Recommendations for Vegetarians	
Males 14-18 years	20 mg per day
Females 14-18 years	27 mg per day
Women 19-49 years	33 mg per day
Pregnant women	49 mg per day
Men (all ages) and women over 50 years	14 mg per day

Endurance athletes may need more iron than the RDA. Athletes should choose several iron-rich foods every day.

How do I get enough iron?

Following Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide will help you to get the iron you need. The guide recommends 2 to 3 servings of meat and alternatives, at least one dark green vegetable, and at least half of your grain products as whole grain every day. For more information, see HealthLink BC File [#68d Iron in Foods](#).

How can I get the most iron from food?

The amount of iron you absorb from food depends on how much iron you have stored in your body. People with low iron levels absorb more. The amount of iron you absorb also depends on the type of iron you eat. Heme iron, found in meat, fish and poultry, is well absorbed. Non-heme iron, found in beans and lentils, whole grains, vegetables, fruits, nuts and seeds, and eggs is not as well absorbed.

By eating certain foods at the same time, your body can absorb more non-heme iron. Eat foods high in vitamin C at each meal to get the most non-heme iron from foods. Vitamin C rich foods include: red, yellow and green peppers, papaya, kiwi fruit, oranges, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, strawberries, grapefruit, snow peas, orange and grapefruit juices, and fruit juices with vitamin C added.

Foods that contain heme iron can also help you absorb non-heme iron if they are eaten at the same time. Examples of food combinations that help you to get the most iron include:

- Split pea soup (non-heme iron) with some ham (heme iron)
- Iron fortified breakfast cereal (non-heme iron) with an orange or half a grapefruit (vitamin C)
- Lentils (non-heme iron), broccoli, and red peppers (vitamin C) in tomato sauce

To increase the amount of non-heme iron in foods, cook with cast-iron or stainless steel cookware. Drink tea or coffee one hour after meals, rather than with meals. These beverages can reduce the amount of non-heme iron absorbed from foods.

Do I need an iron supplement?

Some people may need iron supplements, but these are not recommended for everyone. Do not take iron supplements unless your doctor recommends them. Iron supplements or too much iron can be harmful to some people, especially infants and children. People with hemochromatosis absorb too much iron and should not take iron supplements.

Always keep iron supplements, including multivitamins with iron, out of reach of children.

If you are diagnosed with low iron or anemia, you may need to take iron supplements. You should also eat iron-rich foods every day. If your doctor has prescribed both iron supplements and calcium supplements, talk to your pharmacist or dietitian about the best times to take them.

For More Information

- HealthLink BC File [#68d Iron in Foods](#)
- Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide. Visit www.healthcanada.gc.ca/foodguide.

For more nutrition information, call 8-1-1 to speak with a registered dietitian.

For more HealthLink BC File topics, visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca/healthfiles/index.stm or your local public health unit.

Click on www.HealthLinkBC.ca or call **8-1-1** for non-emergency health information and services in B.C.

For deaf and hearing-impaired assistance, call 7-1-1 in B.C.

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