



Iron and Your Health

Why is iron important?

Iron is a mineral that your body uses to make hemoglobin (pronounced “hee-muh-glow-bin”). Hemoglobin is found in your red blood cells and helps carry oxygen to all parts of your body. Without enough iron, your body will not have enough hemoglobin and you may develop iron deficiency anemia (pronounced “ah-nee-me-ah”). Symptoms of anemia include feeling tired all the time and getting sick more easily.

How much iron do I need?

The amount of iron you need depends on your age and sex. To meet your needs, aim to eat the following amounts of iron each day, also called the Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA):

Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA) for Iron (Daily)		
Age (years)	Men	Women
1 to 3	7 mg	7 mg
4 to 8	10 mg	10 mg
9 to 13	8 mg	8 mg
14 to 18	11 mg	15 mg
19 to 49	8 mg	18 mg
Over 50	8 mg	8 mg
Pregnancy	N/A	27 mg
Breastfeeding under 19	N/A	10 mg
Breastfeeding 19 and over	N/A	9 mg

mg = milligrams

Do some people need even more iron?

Babies and children, pregnant women, vegetarians, women older than 50 years who still menstruate, frequent blood donors, women who

have heavy menstrual bleeding, and endurance athletes may need more iron. Talk to your health care provider about the amount of iron that is right for you and your family.

Babies and children need iron for healthy growth and development, including brain development.

Pregnant women need more iron to support the growth of their babies. If you are pregnant choose iron-rich foods every day and take a daily multivitamin/mineral supplement with 16 to 20 mg of iron. If your iron levels were low before getting pregnant, you may need to take more iron.

Vegetarians need more iron in their diets because the iron from plant foods is not absorbed by the body as well as iron from animal foods. If you are a vegetarian, aim for the following amounts of iron each day:

Daily Iron Recommendations for Vegetarians		
Age (years)	Men	Women
14 to 18	20 mg	27 mg
19 to 49	14 mg	33 mg
50 and above	14 mg	14 mg
Pregnancy	N/A	49 mg

mg = milligrams

Women over the age of 50 who still menstruate can continue to use the RDA for women 19 to 49 years.

Frequent blood donors may need more iron depending on a variety of factors, which include how often they donate.

Endurance athletes such as long distance runners may need more iron because of the intensity of their activity.

How do babies get enough iron?

Breast milk is the only food babies need until 6 months of age. Continue to offer breast milk until your baby is 2 years or older. The iron in breastmilk is very well absorbed. Babies who are not given breast milk need to be fed a store bought infant formula until they are 9 to 12 months of age and are eating a variety of iron-rich foods.

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 cooked tofu. If your family is vegetarian, talk to a registered dietitian to make sure your baby gets enough iron. For more information, see [HealthLinkBC File #69c Baby's First Foods](#).

How can I get the most iron from food?

Food contains iron in 2 forms:

- *Heme* iron - which is found in meat, fish and poultry, and is easily absorbed by your body.
- *Non-heme* iron - which is found in beans and lentils, whole grains, vegetables, fruits, nuts and seeds, and eggs, and is not absorbed as well by your body.

You can absorb more non-heme iron from foods by eating them at the same time as foods with heme iron, and foods high in vitamin C. Examples of foods high in vitamin C include: red, yellow and green peppers, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, snow peas, papaya, kiwi fruit, strawberries, oranges and grapefruit.

Try these food combinations to help you get the most iron:

- iron fortified breakfast cereal (non-heme iron) with an orange or half a grapefruit (vitamin C);
- split pea soup (non-heme iron) with some pork (heme iron);
- salad made with spinach (non-heme iron) and strawberries or peppers (vitamin C); and
- lentils (non-heme iron), broccoli, and red peppers (vitamin C) in tomato sauce.

Cook with cast-iron or stainless steel cookware to increase the amount of non-heme iron in foods.

Drink black tea, herbal tea or coffee 1 hour after meals, rather than with your meal. These beverages can reduce the amount of non-heme iron absorbed from foods.

Do I need an iron supplement?

In addition to eating iron-rich foods every day, some people may need iron supplements. Only take iron supplements when recommended by your health care provider. Too much iron can be harmful, especially for 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 taking calcium supplements as well as iron, talk with your pharmacist or dietitian about the best time of day to take them. Calcium may decrease the amount of iron that is absorbed by your body from a supplement.

For More Information

For more information on iron, see [HealthLinkBC File #68d Iron in Foods](#).

Visit Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide at www.healthcanada.gc.ca/foodguide for information about the 4 food groups.

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

For more HealthLinkBC File topics, visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca/healthfiles 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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