



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

### How much iron do I need?

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

Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA) for Iron (Daily)		
Age (years)	Male	Female
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

Vegetarians need to eat almost twice as much iron as people who eat meat, fish, and poultry because the iron from plant foods is not absorbed by the body as well as iron from animal foods.

Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA) for Iron for Vegetarians (Daily)		
Age (years)	Male	Female
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

### Do some people need more iron?

Yes. You may need more iron than the RDA. Talk to your health care provider about the amount of iron that is right for you and your family members.

**Women over the age of 50 who still menstruate** can continue to use the RDA for women 19 to 49 years. Women with heavy menstrual bleeding may need extra iron too.

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

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

### How do I get enough iron if I am pregnant?

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. Talk to your health care provider about your iron needs.

### How do babies get enough iron?

Most healthy babies are born with iron stores that will last about 6 months. 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 should 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.

At about 6 months, your baby needs more iron. Include iron-rich solid foods in your baby's diet every day starting at 6 months of age. These include iron-fortified infant cereal, meat, poultry, fish, egg, lentils, beans, and 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 or 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)
- 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.

Do not drink black tea, herbal tea or coffee with your meal. Wait 1 hour after eating. 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 registered 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](#).

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