

Iron in foods

Why is iron important?

Iron is a mineral that your body uses to make hemoglobin. 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. Some symptoms of anemia are feeling tired all the time and getting sick more easily.

Iron is especially important for babies and children. It supports healthy growth, brain development, and immune function.

What foods contain iron?

Iron is found naturally in many foods such as:

- Meat, poultry, fish, eggs
- Beans, peas, lentils, tofu
- Whole grains such as quinoa, oats and whole grain bread
- Dark green vegetables such as spinach and beet greens
- Nuts and seeds

Some foods have iron added to them. In Canada, iron must be added to certain foods like white flour and meat substitutes. Other foods such as breakfast cereal, infant cereal and pasta may also have added iron. Check the ingredient list to see if iron has been added to a packaged food.

What are the different forms of iron in foods?

There are 2 types of iron found in foods:

- *Heme* iron: This type is easily absorbed and is found in meat, fish and poultry
- *Non-heme* iron: This type is not as easily absorbed. It's found in eggs, plant-based foods and foods with added iron

You can absorb more non-heme iron from foods by eating them at the same time as foods with heme iron or those 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, grapefruit

How much iron is in food?

You can use the table below to find common food sources of iron. You can also use the Canadian Nutrient File to look up the iron content of a food.

For packaged foods that have a label, check the nutrition facts table. The percent daily value (% DV) on the nutrition facts table tells you if a food has 'a little' or 'a lot' of iron. 'A little' is 5% DV or less and 'a lot' is 15% DV or more. Labels will also list the amount of iron in milligrams (mg).

For more information

- [HealthLinkBC File #68c Iron and your health](#)
- [HealthlinkBC File #69i Iron-rich foods for babies and toddlers](#)
- Iron content of specific foods: [Canadian Nutrient File](#)

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

Food sources of iron

Foods with heme iron	Serving	Iron (mg)
Liver (beef, chicken or pork)*	75 g (2 ½ oz)	4.6 to 13.4
Mussels or oysters**	75 g (2 ½ oz)	5.0 to 6.3
Beef	75 g (2 ½ oz)	2.4
Clams or sardines	75 g (2 ½ oz)	2.1
Lamb	75 g (2 ½ oz)	1.5
Canned light tuna, herring, trout or mackerel	75 g (2 ½ oz)	1.2
Chicken or pork	75 g (2 ½ oz)	0.9
Salmon or turkey	75 g (2 ½ oz)	0.5
Foods with non-heme iron	Serving	Iron (mg)
Tofu	150 g, 175mL (¾ cup)	1.2 to 8.0
Infant cereal with added iron	28 g, 75 mL (5 tbsp)	7.0
Soybeans, cooked	175 mL (¾ cup)	6.5
Beans or lentils, boiled	175 mL (¾ cup)	3.3 to 4.9
Pumpkin or squash seeds/kernels, roasted	60 mL (¼ cup)	4.7
Cold cereal with added iron	30 g, 125-250mL (½ to 1 cup)	4.7
Blackstrap molasses	15 mL (1 tbsp)	3.6
Edamame	175 mL (¾ cup)	3.4
Hot cereal with added iron	175 mL (¾ cup)	3.4
Spinach, cooked	125 mL (½ cup)	3.4
Meatless meatballs	150 g, 250 mL (1 cup)	3.2
Quinoa, spelt, amaranth or teff, cooked	125 mL (½ cup)	1.5 to 2.7
Tahini (sesame seed butter)	30 mL (2 tbsp)	2.3
Beet greens or Swiss chard, cooked	125 mL (½ cup)	1.5 to 2.1
Potato, baked with skin	1 medium	1.9
Bagel	1/2 bagel	1.9
Seaweed, agar (dried)	8 g, 125 mL (½ cup)	1.7
Prune puree	60 mL (¼ cup)	1.7
Eggs	2	1.4
Quick or large flake oats, prepared	175 mL (¾ cup)	1.4
Pecans, walnuts, hazelnuts or almonds	60 mL (¼ cup)	0.8 to 1.3
Green peas, cooked	125 mL (½ cup)	1.3
White bread	35 g (1 slice)	1.3
Egg noodles with added iron	125 mL (½ cup)	1.2
Sunflower seeds/kernels, dry roasted	60 mL (¼ cup)	1.2
Tomato sauce, canned	125 mL (½ cup)	1.2
Sauerkraut	125 mL (½ cup)	1.1
Soy beverage	250 mL (1 cup)	1.1
Spinach, raw	250 mL (1 cup)	0.9
Raisins or dried apricots	60 mL (¼ cup)	0.8 to 0.9
Whole wheat bread	35 g (1 slice)	0.9
Whole wheat pasta, cooked	125 mL (½ cup)	0.8

g = gram, mg = milligram, mL = milliliter, tbsp = tablespoon, oz = ounce **Source:** [Canadian Nutrient File](#)

*If you're pregnant, limit liver and liver products to 75 g (2 ½ oz) per week during the first trimester. Liver is high in vitamin A. Too much vitamin A may cause birth defects.

**Pacific oysters from British Columbia tend to be higher in cadmium. Limit intake to 12 oysters per month for adults and 1.5 per month for children

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