

Iron in Your Diet

Iron is a vital mineral for health. Too little iron can cause iron deficiency anemia. This can make you feel tired and increase your risk of illness or disease. Anemia is common. It is seen more often in toddlers, teenagers and the elderly.

Iron needs vary with age and gender. People need more iron during growth periods (pregnancy, infancy, childhood and teen years), and during menstrual periods. Pre-term infants may also need more iron.

Women

Menstruating, very active or pregnant women may need a daily multivitamin with 18 mg iron (more is needed for pregnant women). You should only take a greater amount of iron if told to do so by your doctor. Large amounts of iron can be toxic.

Men

Men need less iron than women. Because it is easy to get the needed amount of iron from food sources alone, iron pills are not often needed. If you choose to take a daily multivitamin, be sure it provides no more than 10-11 mg iron. Large amounts of iron are toxic.

Children

Infants who are not breastfeeding should receive iron-fortified infant formula. If born premature or not taking solids by 6 months of age, your child may need an iron supplement. Talk to your doctor. First foods for infants should be iron-fortified infant cereals or pureed meats. Toddlers and preschool age children should drink no more than 24-32 oz milk per day because this can decrease the amount of iron that is absorbed which may lead to anemia.

Forms of Dietary Iron

- **Heme iron** comes from animal sources such as beef, pork, lamb, fish, chicken and turkey. Your body absorbs heme iron better than non-heme iron.
- **Non-heme iron** is found in fortified grain products, beans, peas, eggs, and some fruits and vegetables. Your body does not absorb non-heme iron as well.

If you are a vegetarian, you may need about twice as much iron in your diet. Try to eat iron-rich foods at most meals.

To Increase Iron Intake & Absorption

- Enjoy many iron-rich foods. Eat at least one iron-rich food at each meal.
- Check the nutrition label on breakfast cereals. Look for at least 30% of the Recommended Daily Value for iron.
- Add beans to soups, stews or casseroles.
- Have pasta with tomato sauce instead of cream sauce.
- Add dried fruit to cereal or your favorite baked good recipe.
- Combine vitamin C-rich foods with iron-rich foods. Vitamin C helps your body absorb iron. This very important for vegetarians.
- Use a cast iron skillet for cooking.
- Add blackstrap molasses to baked goods.

Avoid large amounts of calcium, coffee and tea with meals. These may decrease the amount of iron your body absorbs.

Amount of Iron Needed Daily

Age	Male	Female		
0–6 months	< 1 mg*	< 1 mg*		
7–12 months	11 mg	11 mg		
1–3 years	7 mg	7 mg		
4–8 years	10 mg	10 mg		
9–13 years	8 mg	8 mg	Pregnancy	Lactation
14–18 years	11 mg	15 mg	27 mg	10 mg
19–50 years	8 mg	18 mg	27 mg	9 mg
51+ years	8 mg	8 mg		

**Infants should receive an iron-fortified formula if they are not breastfed.*

Iron Content of Foods*

Foods with Non-heme Iron	mg Iron
Fortified breakfast cereal, 1 oz.	5-18
Instant oatmeal, 1 packet	4
Lentils, cooked, ½ cup	3
Spinach, cooked, ½ cup	3
Beans (kidney, black, pinto, lima, white, garbanzo), ½ cup	2
Tofu, ½ cup	2
Edamame, ½ cup	2
Sunflower seeds, ¼ cup	2
Prune juice, ½ cup	2
Enriched bread, 1 slice	1
Enriched pasta, cooked, ½ cup	1
Enriched rice, cooked, ½ cup	1
Medium baked potato w/ skin	1
Green peas, cooked, ½ cup	1
Almonds or cashews, 1 oz.	1
Blackstrap molasses, 1 Tbsp.	1
Dried apricots, 5 halves	0.5
Raisins, 1 oz box	0.5

Foods with Heme Iron	mg Iron
Oysters, 3 oz.	4
Beef, 3 oz.	2
Chicken, 3 oz.	1
Egg, 1 large	1
Pork or ham, 3 oz.	1
Tuna, 3 oz.	1
Salmon, 3 oz.	1

*These amounts are an estimate

Food Sources of Vitamin C

Vitamin C foods help your body absorb iron if eaten at the same time as iron-rich foods.

Over 75 mg per ½ Cup Serving

- Orange
- Kiwi
- Tomato juice

25-75 mg per ½ Cup Serving

- Orange juice
- Grapefruit
- Pineapple
- Mango
- Papaya
- Strawberries
- Cantaloupe
- Tomato
- Bell pepper
- Peapods
- Cauliflower
- Broccoli
- Brussels sprouts
- Cabbage

Teach Back

What is the most important thing you learned from this handout?

What changes will you make in your diet/lifestyle, based on what you learned today?

Who to Call

If you have more questions, contact UW Health at one of the phone numbers listed below. You can also visit our website at www.uwhealth.org/nutrition

Nutrition clinics for UW Hospital and Clinics (UWHC) and American Family Children's Hospital (AFCH) can be reached at: **(608) 890-5500.**

Nutrition clinics for UW Medical Foundation (UWMF) can be reached at: **(608) 287-2770**

Your health care team may have given you this information as part of your care. If so, please use it and call if you have any questions. If this information was not given to you as part of your care, please check with your doctor. This is not medical advice. This is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. Because each person's health needs are different, you should talk with your doctor or others on your health care team when using this information. If you have an emergency, please call 911. Copyright © 1/2020 University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Clinical Nutrition Services Department and the Department of Nursing. HF#182