

Patient Information

Iron in the Diet

What is iron?

Iron is a mineral that is important to all body cells. It is particularly important for blood cells because iron is needed to make hemoglobin. Hemoglobin is the protein in blood cells that carries oxygen to body tissues.

If you don't have enough iron you may develop iron deficiency anemia, a condition in which your blood contains less hemoglobin than normal. People who have iron deficiency anemia are often tired and lack energy.

Iron deficiency anemia may result from:

- a diet that lacks enough iron
- blood loss
- body changes during pregnancy.

How much iron do I need?

How much iron you need depends on your age and whether you are male or female. The recommendations are:

GROUP

MG IRON PER DAY

Children 7 to 12 months old	11
Children 1 to 3 years old	7
Children 4 to 8 years old	10
Children 9 to 13 years old	8
Females 14 to 18 years old	15
Males 14 to 18 years old	11
Males over 18 years old	8
Females 19 to 50 years old	18
Females over 50 years old	8
Pregnant females	27
Breast-feeding females 14 to 18 years old	10
Breast-feeding females 19 to 50 years old	9

What foods are good sources of iron?

Iron is found in a variety of foods. Heme iron is found in meat, poultry, and fish. Nonheme iron is found in fruits, vegetables, grains, nuts, legumes, and iron-

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enriched foods. The body absorbs heme iron better than nonheme iron.

FOOD

SERVING SIZE

[MG IRON (APPROXIMATE)]

Heme Sources

liver, chicken	3 oz	7.2
liver, beef	3 oz	5.8
beef	3 oz	3.0
shrimp	3 oz	2.8
turkey, dark	3 oz	2.0
ground beef	3 oz	1.8
lamb	3 oz	1.5
chicken, dark	3 oz	1.3
chicken, white	3 oz	1.1
turkey, white	3 oz	1.1
fish	3 oz	1.1
pork, shoulder	3 oz	1.0
pork, loin	3 oz	0.8
tuna, white, water packed	3 oz	0.8

Nonheme Sources

fortified breakfast cereals*	1 cup	4.5 to 18
soy beans, cooked	1/2 cup	4.7
pumpkin seeds	1 oz	4.2
molasses, blackstrap	1 tablespoon	3.5
lentils	1/2 cup	3.3
spinach, cooked	1/2 cup	3.2
bagel	1 bagel	3.2
tofu, extra firm	3 oz	2.7
prune juice	8 oz	2.7
potato, baked with skin	1 potato	2.7
red kidney beans	1/2 cup	2.6
green peas	1 cup	2.5
navy beans	1/2 cup	2.3
garbanzo beans	1/2 cup	2.3
black-eyed peas	1/2 cup	2.2
asparagus, cooked	1 cup	2.2
avocado	1 avocado	2.0

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macaroni, enriched, cooked	1 cup	2.0
green beans, cooked	1 cup	1.6
enriched rice, cooked	1/2 cup	1.4
apricots, dried	6 apricots	1.2
dates	10 dates	1.0
wheat germ, toasted	2 tablespoons	1.0
whole wheat bread	1 slice	0.9
raisins	1/4 cup	0.8

* Many cereals and breads are fortified with extra iron.
Check the labels.

Heme foods that are very high in iron such as beef and chicken livers are also very high in cholesterol. Eat these foods in limited amounts.

Do I need an iron supplement?

If you get enough iron in your diet you don't need a supplement. Taking unnecessary supplements may be harmful. You can accumulate too much iron in your body, which can damage various organs.

If you have iron deficiency anemia, your healthcare provider may recommend a supplement. Some supplements cause constipation. Make sure you drink enough fluid and have enough fiber in your diet.

What foods affect the way the body absorbs iron?

Vitamin C (high in citrus fruits and tomatoes) helps the body absorb nonheme iron. To help your body absorb nonheme iron, try combinations like spinach salad with mandarin oranges slices or a glass of grapefruit juice with your cereal. Also, eating heme-iron-rich foods with nonheme-iron-rich foods helps increase absorption. Consuming coffee and tea (even decaffeinated), excess dietary fiber, or calcium supplements within 2 hours of eating iron-rich foods can decrease iron absorption.

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