

Iron and your health

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. Most healthy babies are born with enough iron stored in their bodies to last for about 6 months. By this time, they're ready to start solid foods. Offering iron-rich foods several times a day helps ensure they meet their iron needs.

How much iron do I need?

Aim for the following amounts of iron each day:

Age (years)	Sex	
	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 50	8 mg	18 mg
51 and older	8 mg	8 mg
Pregnancy, any age	-	27 mg
Lactation, under 19	-	10 mg
Lactation, 19 and over	-	9 mg

mg = milligrams

*The recommended amount of iron for those who menstruate at this age is 11mg per day.

Do some people need more iron?

Yes. Some people may need more iron than the amounts listed in the table above.

Vegetarians need to eat almost twice as much iron as people who eat meat, fish and poultry. The body does not absorb iron from plant foods as well as iron from animal foods. Learn how to get the most iron from plant-based foods below.

Those 51 and older who still menstruate can continue to follow the recommendations for females 19 to 50 years old. People with heavy menstrual bleeding may need extra iron.

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 for many reasons, such as increased iron losses.

You may need more iron if you take certain medications such as antacids or have a medical condition such as celiac disease. If you think you need more iron, talk to your health care provider about your iron needs.

How do I get enough iron if I'm pregnant?

During pregnancy, more iron is needed to support the growth of your baby. To help get enough iron, choose a variety of iron-rich foods and take a multivitamin supplement with 16 to 20 mg of iron every day. If your iron levels were low before getting pregnant, you may need to take even more iron. Talk to your health care provider about your iron needs.

What are the different forms of iron in food?

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 naturally in beans, peas, and lentils, whole grains, dark green vegetables, nuts, seeds and eggs. It may be added to breakfast cereal, infant cereal and pasta

How can I get the most iron from plant-based foods?

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 cookware to increase the amount of non-heme iron in foods.

Don't drink tea or coffee or take calcium supplements with your meal. These can reduce the amount of non-heme iron absorbed from foods. Instead, have these 1 to 2 hours after eating.

How can I include iron-rich foods in my meals and snacks?

- Keep canned tuna and whole grain crackers in the pantry for an easy to grab snack
- Add black strap molasses, nuts, raisins or dried apricots to cereals and baked goods
- Sprinkle pumpkin seeds or grilled chicken on top of a leafy green salad
- Add beans, peas or lentils to salads, soups and casseroles
- Drizzle tahini on tofu or lamb chops

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. Always keep iron supplements, including multivitamins with iron, out of reach of children.

People with hemochromatosis absorb too much iron and should not take iron supplements.

Many medications and supplements can reduce the amount of iron you absorb. Talk with your pharmacist about the best time of day to take iron supplements.

For more information

- [HealthLinkBC File #68d Iron in foods](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #69i Iron-rich foods for babies and toddlers](#)
- Canadian Nutrient File: <https://food-nutrition.canada.ca/cnf-fce>

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