

How to get your daily iron

Getting enough iron is essential for good health and wellbeing. Iron helps to carry oxygen in your blood from your lungs to your brain and muscles. This helps to keep you physically and mentally strong. Because your body uses iron every day, you need to keep up your daily intake to avoid getting low in iron.

If you don't get enough iron, you will feel tired, faint, and breathless, and you might find it hard to concentrate. Your skin might also be pale.

Some people have a higher risk of low iron levels. These include:

- babies, children and teenagers, because they are growing rapidly
- girls and women who have heavy periods
- pregnant women, who are building their baby's iron stores
- athletes
- vegans and vegetarians
- people on restrictive or fad diets.

If you think you are low in iron, talk to your GP or practice nurse, as the only way to diagnose iron deficiency is through a blood test.

You can't treat iron deficiency by diet alone, so if you are low in iron your doctor may prescribe an iron supplement. But even if you are prescribed a supplement, it is still important to get enough iron in your diet. Your doctor will also treat whatever is causing your iron deficiency.

Foods containing iron

Many foods have small amounts of iron. We absorb the iron in animal foods such as meat and fish more easily than the iron in plant foods, such as grains, nuts, seeds, vegetables and fruit.

Excellent sources of iron

- Lean beef
- Lean lamb
- Kidney
- Venison
- Liver (but limit this to 100 g once a week if you are pregnant)
- Shellfish, such as paua and mussels

The redder the meat the higher the iron content.

Good sources of iron

- Fish – especially oily fish such as sardines, tuna, salmon, mackerel
- Lean chicken – the leg meat contains more iron than the breast meat
- Lean pork

Useful sources of iron

- Eggs
- Wholemeal bread and fruit bread
- Iron-fortified breakfast cereals – choose a cereal with at least 3 mg iron per serving





- Dried fruit, such as apricots, raisins, figs
- Green leafy vegetables, such as silverbeet, spinach, watercress
- Nuts and seeds, such as pumpkin, sesame, sunflower
- Legumes, such as kidney beans, chick peas, lentils, split peas, baked beans
- Tofu and tempeh (fermented soybeans)
- Spreads such as Marmite, peanut butter, hummus or tahini (sesame seed paste)

Tips to improve your iron intake

Choose a variety of foods

This is the best way to get enough iron. Every day have food from all the main food groups:

- grain foods – choose mostly wholegrain and those naturally high in fibre.
- vegetables and fruit
- milk and milk products
- lean meat, chicken, seafood, eggs, legumes, nuts and seeds.

Eat lean red meat regularly

- Have a serving of lean red meat at least three times a week. A serving is the size and thickness of the palm of your hand.
- Eat meat, chicken or fish and vegetables together.

Meat, chicken and fish help the body to absorb the iron in vegetables.

Get plenty of vitamin C

Vitamin C helps us to absorb up to four times as much iron. You can get vitamin C from many fruits (berries, feijoas, kiwifruit, mandarin, orange, rock melon, tamarillo) and vegetables (broccoli, capsicum, cauliflower, tomato). Try to include fruit or vegetables with every meal, especially if you are vegetarian.



Eat a variety of plant foods if you are vegetarian

Have plenty of green leafy vegetables and wholegrains, and regularly include eggs, legumes, tofu, tempeh, nuts and seeds.

Keep your meals tannin-free

The tannin in tea and coffee stops your body from absorbing as much iron. Drink tea and coffee between meals rather than with meals.

Written by HealthInfo clinical advisers. Last reviewed May 2020.

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