

Health Facts *for you*

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 fairly common and is seen more often in the elderly and in teenagers.

Iron needs vary with age and gender. The need for iron increases during growth periods (pregnancy, infancy, childhood, and teen years) and for women having menstrual periods.

Amount of Iron Needed Daily

Category	Age	Milligrams/day
Infants & Children	0-6 months	Not determined, seek advice from health provider
	7 months to 3 years	11
Males	4-8 years	10
	9-13 years	8
	14-18 years	11
	19-51+ years	8
Females	9-13 years	8
	14-18 years	15
	19-50 years	18
	51+ years	8
	Pregnant	27
	Breast feeding	9

Forms of Dietary Iron

There are two types of iron—**heme** iron and **non-heme** iron.

- **Heme iron** comes from animal sources such as beef, pork, lamb, fish, chicken, and turkey. Heme iron is the type of iron that is absorbed the best. Of the iron found in meat, fish and poultry about 40% heme iron, the other 60% is non-heme iron.

- **Non-heme iron** is found in whole grains, enriched bread and cereal products, dried beans and peas, eggs, some green vegetables and in raisins, prunes, prune juice and dried apricots. Non-heme iron is not absorbed as well as heme iron.

If you eat a vegetarian diet, iron is not absorbed as well because it is the non-heme form of iron. A vegetarian may need about twice as much iron in their diet than that of a non-vegetarian. Vegetarians should try to eat iron-rich foods at every meal.

Ways to increase your iron intake and absorption:

- Enjoy a number of the iron-rich foods from the list below. Aim for one iron-rich food at each meal.
- Combine vitamin C-rich foods with iron-rich foods. Vitamin C helps your body absorb iron. This is very important for vegetarians who rely on non-heme iron from plant foods that is not absorbed as well.
- Use an iron-skillet for cooking. Some of the iron leaches into the food you are making.
- Use breakfast cereals that have been fortified with iron. Look for cereals that have at least 30% of the USRDA (Recommended Daily Allowance) for iron.
- Add blackstrap molasses and sorghum to baked goods to increase iron content.

Food Sources of Vitamin C (helps absorb iron)

Over 75 mg per ½ C. serving	Orange Broccoli Brussels sprouts
25-75 mg per ½ C. serving	Cabbage Cantaloupe Grapefruit Green pepper Orange juice Strawberries Tomato Turnip Vegetable greens: kale, beet, mustard

Approximate Iron Content of Foods

Foods with Heme Iron	mg Iron
Beef, 3 oz.	3.0
Beef Liver, 3.5 oz.	6.7
Chicken, 3 oz.	1.2
Dried peas or beans, ½ c. cooked	2.0
Egg, 1 medium	1.0
Fish-tuna, ½ c.	1.6
Lean ham, 3.5 oz.	1.5
Oysters, 3 oz.	7.8
Peanut butter, 2 tbsp.	0.6
Pork, 3 oz.	2.7
Salmon, wild, 3 oz.	0.8
Fortified cereal, 1 oz.	4.5-18
Tofu, raw, ½ cup	6.6
Instant oatmeal, 1 packet	6.3
Lentils, 1 cup	6.6
Kidney beans, 1 cup	5.2
Garbanzo beans, 1 cup	4.7

Foods with Non-heme Iron	mg Iron
Enriched white rice or pasta, cooked, 1 cup	1.9
Spinach, boiled, ½ cup	3.2
Green peas, ½ cup	1.2
Wheat bread, 1 slice	0.9
Dried apricots, 5 whole	1.9
Prunes, 5 medium	1.2
Prune juice, ½ c.	5.2
Raisins, 2 tbsp.	0.6
Blackstrap molasses, 1 tbsp.	3.2

Iron Supplements

Men: Men’s iron needs are much lower than women’s. 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-mineral, be sure it provides no more than 10-11 mg iron. Large amounts of iron are toxic.

Women: Menstruating, very active, or pregnant women may need a daily multivitamin-mineral 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.

Infant foods, strained	mg iron
High meat dinner, 1 jar	1.5
Strained meat, 1 jar	2.0
Vegetable / meat dinner, 1 jar	1.0
Strained vegetables, 1 jar	1.2
Iron-fortified infant cereal, 3 tbsp. (1/2 oz)	7.0
Iron-fortified formula, 26 oz.	10.0

Iron Needs for Infants

- Infants should receive an iron-fortified formula if they are not breastfeeding.
- Infant iron-fortified cereals should be used until 18 months of age. Your doctor may suggest which formula and/or cereal to use.
- Your child will need an iron food source starting between 4 and 6 months of age. One such source would be to use an iron-fortified formula until your infant is eating two servings of iron-fortified cereal a day.

If you have more questions please contact UW Health at one of the phone numbers listed below.

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