

# Iron and Your Health

Your body needs iron to help carry the oxygen in your blood through your body. Without enough iron, you will tire more easily and be less able to fight off infections. Infants and children also need iron for normal brain development.

You need more iron during childhood, adolescence, and pregnancy. Vegetarians, athletes, and women who have menstrual periods also need more iron.

## How much iron do I need?

Iron needs change throughout your life.

Daily Recommended Intake for Iron		
Age (years)	Male (mg)	Female (mg)
7 months to 1 year	11	11
1 to 3	7	7
4 to 8	10	10
9 to 13	8	8
14 to 18	11	15
19 to 50	8	18
Over 50	8	8
Pregnancy (all ages)	-	27
<b>Breastfeeding:</b>		
under 18	-	10
18 to 50	-	9
<b>Vegetarian:</b>		
14 to 18	20	27
Women, 19 to 50	-	32
Women, 50 and over	-	14
Men, 19 and over	14	-

## Some people need more iron

### Vegetarians

Vegetarians need more iron because iron from plant foods (non-heme iron) is not absorbed as well as iron from animal foods. Vegetarians should choose several iron-rich foods each day.

### Pregnant Women

You need more iron when you are pregnant. You should take a multivitamin that has **16 to 20 mg** of iron every day. A healthy diet is also important.

### Athletes

Athletes who compete in long-distance sports like marathons, triathlons, and cycling may need more iron than non-athletes. Athletes should choose several iron-rich foods every day.

### Other people who may need more iron:

- people who donate blood often
- people with digestive problems such as celiac disease
- women taking hormone replacement therapy
- women with heavy menstrual periods

## Iron in Food

Only some of the iron in food is absorbed. There are two types of iron in foods:

- heme iron: found in meat, poultry, and fish
- non-heme iron: found in plant foods such as legumes, vegetables, fruit, grains, nuts, and iron-fortified grain products

**Heme iron in meat, fish, and poultry is absorbed best.**

### Caution: Too much iron is toxic.

**Children:** Always keep iron supplements and multivitamins with iron out of children's reach! Children should only take an iron supplement if a doctor prescribes it.

**Adults:** Do not take iron supplements unless your doctor tells you to. Take only the dose your doctor prescribes.

## What about iron supplements?

Iron supplements are **not** for everyone. Don't take iron supplements unless your doctor tells you to.

If your doctor has prescribed both iron supplements and calcium supplements, talk to your pharmacist or Registered Dietitian about the best times to take them.

## How do I increase the iron in my diet?

- Follow Canada's Food Guide.
- Choose "Excellent" sources of iron most often. See the table on this page.
- Vitamin C helps your body absorb more iron.
  - Cook high iron foods together with foods high in vitamin C.
  - Eat foods high in vitamin C at each meal.
  - Good sources of vitamin C include oranges, lemons, grapefruit and their juices, cantaloupe, honeydew, kiwi fruit, berries, juices fortified with vitamin C, broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, kale, peppers, potatoes, and tomatoes.
- Add dried beans, peas and lentils to soups, salads, casseroles, chili, and sauces.
- Add molasses, nuts, or dried fruit (raisins, dates, or apricots) to cereals and baked goods.
- Choose whole grains and cereals fortified with iron.
- Cook in cast-iron cookware to increase the amount of iron in foods.
- Drink tea or coffee between meals instead of with meals. Tea and coffee can reduce the amount of iron your body absorbs.

### Excellent sources of iron

Food	Amount	Iron (mg)
Liver, pork*	2½ oz (75 g)	13
Liver, chicken*	2½ oz (75 g)	10
Oysters or mussels	2½ oz (75 g)	5 to 7
Liver, beef*	2½ oz (75 g)	5
Cold cereal, enriched	30 g	4
Instant hot cereal, enriched, cooked	¾ cup (175 mL)	3 to 6
Beef	2½ oz (75 g)	2 to 3
Clams, canned	2½ oz (75 g)	2
Sardines	2½ oz (75 g)	2
Shrimp	2½ oz (75 g)	2
Chicken	2½ oz (75 g)	1
Lamb	2½ oz (75 g)	1
Pork	2½ oz (75 g)	1
Turkey	2½ oz (75 g)	0.5
Fish	2½ oz (75 g)	0.5

### Good sources of iron

Food	Amount	Iron (mg)
Soybeans, mature, cooked	¾ cup (175 mL)	7
Lentils, cooked	¾ cup (175 mL)	5
Red kidney beans, cooked	¾ cup (175 mL)	4
Molasses, blackstrap	1 Tbsp (15 mL)	4
Chickpeas, cooked	¾ cup (175 mL)	4
Spinach, boiled	½ cup (125 mL)	3
Tofu, firm	¾ cup (175 mL)	2 to 9
Amaranth	½ cup (125 mL)	3
Lima beans, boiled	½ cup (125 mL)	2
Chard, boiled	½ cup (125 mL)	2
Potato, baked with skin	1 medium	2
Bagel	½	2
Eggs	2	1
Asparagus, boiled	½ cup (125 mL)	1
Quinoa	½ cup (125 mL)	1
Pasta, enriched, cooked	½ cup (125 mL)	1
Dried figs	5	1

*Iron amounts are from the Canadian Nutrient File 2010.*

\* Liver is high in vitamin A. Pregnant women should limit the amount of liver they eat.