

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. Babies and children also need iron for healthy brain development.

How much iron do I need?

Your iron needs will 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
Pregnant (all ages)	-	27
Lactating:		
under 18	-	10
18 to 50	-	9
Vegetarian:		
14 to 18	20	27
19 to 50	14	32
Over 50	14	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 (heme iron).

- Choose several iron-rich foods each day.

Pregnancy

You need more iron when you are pregnant.

- Take a multivitamin that has **16–27 mg** of iron every day.
- Eat a healthy diet.

Athletes

Athletes who compete in long-distance sports like marathons, triathlons, and cycling may need more iron than non-athletes.

- Choose several iron-rich foods every day.

Other reasons you may need more iron:

- donate blood often
- have celiac disease
- take hormone replacement therapy
- have heavy menstrual periods

Iron in food

Only some of the iron in food is absorbed by your body. 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. Also in eggs.

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



How do I increase the iron in my diet?

Choose foods that are sources of iron. See the list of Food Sources of Iron on this page.

- 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 or enriched with iron.
- Cook in cast-iron cookware to increase the amount of iron in foods.

Tea and coffee can reduce the amount of iron your body absorbs. Drink tea or coffee between meals instead of with meals.

What about vitamin C?

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 berries, broccoli, cabbage, cantaloupe, cauliflower, grapefruit, honeydew, kale, kiwis, lemons, oranges, peppers, potatoes, and tomatoes.



What about iron supplements?

Iron supplements are **not** for everyone. Don't take iron supplements unless your doctor tells you to. Talk to your pharmacist or dietitian about the best time to take your iron. Only take the type and amount of iron prescribed by your doctor.

Caution: Too much iron is toxic.

Keep iron supplements and multivitamins with iron out of children's reach!

Food Sources of Iron

Iron Amount	Food	Amount
At least 3.5 mg	Chickpeas or lentils, cooked	¾ cup (175 mL)
	Cold cereal, enriched	30 g
	Hot cereal, enriched, cooked	¾ cup (175 mL)
	Molasses, blackstrap	1 Tbsp (15 mL)
	Pumpkin seed kernels, roasted	¼ cup (60 mL)
	Soybeans, mature, cooked	¾ cup (175 mL)
	Liver (beef, chicken, or pork)*	2½ oz (75 g)
	Moose Mussels or oysters	2½ oz (75 g) 2½ oz (75 g)
At least 2.1 mg	Amaranth, cooked	½ cup (125 mL)
	Chard or spinach, boiled	½ cup (125 mL)
	Chia, flax, sesame seeds	¼ cup (60 mL)
	Lima beans, boiled	½ cup (125 mL)
	Red kidney beans, cooked	¾ cup (175 mL)
	Tofu, firm	¾ cup (175 mL)
	Wheat germ	¼ cup (60 mL)
	Beef, elk, or venison	2½ oz (75 g)
	Sardines, canned	2½ oz (75 g)
	At least 0.7 mg	Nut butters
Asparagus, beets or green peas, boiled		½ cup (125 mL)
Bagel, or bread, enriched		½ (52 g) bagel or 1 slice (35 g)
Dried figs		5 pieces (75 mL)
Oatmeal, pasta, or quinoa, cooked		½ cup (125 mL)
Potato, baked with skin		½ medium
Pumpkin, cooked/canned		½ cup (125 mL)
Split peas		¾ cup (175 mL)
Chicken, lamb, or pork		2½ oz (75 g)
Clams, Light tuna, canned		2½ oz (75 g)
Egg		1 large

* Liver is high in vitamin A. If you are pregnant limit the amount of liver you eat.

For more support



- Talk to your healthcare team.
- Call Health Link at 811 and ask to talk to a dietitian or complete a [self-referral form](https://ahs.ca/811) on ahs.ca/811.
- Visit ahs.ca/nutrition.