



Iron and Your Diet

A Guide for Patients



The Ottawa
Hospital

Disclaimer

This patient education resource is not medical advice. It shares common health facts, advice and tips. Some of the information provided in this resource may not apply to you. Please talk to your doctor, nurse or other health-care team member to see if this information will work for you. They can also answer any questions or concerns that you might have.

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What is iron and why do you need it?

Iron is a nutrient found in food. There are 2 types of iron found in foods:

- Heme iron that is found in meat, fish and eggs.
- Non-heme iron that is found in plant foods.

Iron is important for our bodies because it:

- Makes hemoglobin.
- Makes myoglobin (myoglobin helps deliver oxygen to muscles).
- Helps our hair and nails grow.
- Helps our mood and memory.
- Supports our immune system to fight infections.
- Helps with mother and baby health during pregnancy.

How much iron do you need?

The table below shows the amount of iron you need daily. There are different recommendations for males and females and different ages.

People who do not eat meat products or eat very little meat products (such as vegans or vegetarians) need higher amounts of iron daily.

Age (years)	Gender	Amount of iron recommended daily (mg)
19 and older	Male	8
19 to 50	Female	18
51 and older	Female	8
18 to 50	Female – pregnant	27
18 to 50	Female – breastfeeding	9

Source: Health Canada. (2023, December). Dietary reference intakes tables: Reference values for elements. Government of Canada.

<https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/food-nutrition/healthy-eating/dietary-reference-intakes/tables/reference-values-elements.html#tbl2>

What are iron-rich foods?

The table below has a list of some foods that are rich in iron. There are other foods that may have iron. Check the nutritional label on those foods to see how much iron per serving they have.

Food	Serving Size	Iron (mg)
Grains & Seeds (non-heme iron foods)		
Breakfast cereals (bran, oat, wheat, iron-fortified)	1 cup	8-18
Oatmeal (iron-fortified)	1 cup, cooked	14
Oatmeal (regular)	1 cup, cooked	2
Quinoa	½ cup	2
Bagel	1 bagel	2
Seeds (pumpkin, sunflower)	¼ cup	1-2
Whole wheat bread	1 slice	1
Rice	½ cup	1
Protein (heme-iron foods)		
Liver *	75g	4-13

Oysters, mussels	75g	5-6
Clams	75g	2
Fish (tuna, herring, trout, mackerel)	75g	1-2
Chicken, beef, pork, lamb	75g	1-2
Protein & Legumes (non-heme iron foods)		
Nuts (cashews, almonds, pine nuts, pistachios)	¼ cup	2-4
Tofu	75g	4
Beans (kidney, lima, soybeans, chickpeas, pinto, black)	½ cup	2-4
Lentils	½ cup	2-4
Egg	1 egg	1
Vegetables (non-heme iron foods)		
Spinach	½ cup, cooked	3
Kale	1 cup, raw	2
Baked potato	1 medium	2
Beets	½ cup, cooked	1
Green peas	½ cup, cooked	1
Broccoli	½ cup, cooked	1

* Note: although liver is high in iron, it should not be eaten during pregnancy because it has high levels of vitamin A. High levels of vitamin A are not good for baby's development in uterus.

How can you improve your iron absorption from food?

Type of iron

- The best sources of iron are animal products, such as meat, poultry, fish, and eggs. Iron from animal products is called heme iron.
- Some plant foods also have iron, such as beans, lentils, tofu, nuts, seeds, dried fruits, and iron fortified cereal. Iron from plant foods is called non-heme iron.



Our body absorbs the iron from animal products (such as meat) much better than the iron from plant foods.

Food combinations

You can help your body absorb the iron from plant foods better by eating them with foods that are rich in vitamin C, such as citrus fruits, tomatoes, peppers, broccoli, or strawberries.



Add berries to your oatmeal to absorb more iron from your oatmeal.

There are foods, drinks, and medications that make it harder for your body to absorb iron. Foods and medication to **avoid** having with your iron-rich foods are:

- Calcium-rich foods such as dairy products.
- Tea and coffee
- Heartburn medications, calcium supplements.



Wait 1 to 2 hours after your meal to have your tea or coffee.

Cooking

Cooking in a cast iron pan increases the amount of iron in the food you are cooking.



If you are eating iron-rich foods and your iron levels are still low, speak with your health care provider about other things you can do to increase your iron levels. You may benefit from iron pills or intravenous iron.

To learn more

There are other resources related to iron prepared by The Ottawa Hospital that you may like to read:

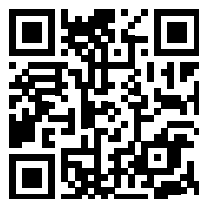
- Understanding Iron Deficiency Anemia: A Guide for Patients
- Iron Pills: A Guide for Patients
- Intravenous (IV) Iron Infusions: A Guide for Patients

Notes



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Is it welcoming and respectful of your background, culture, and identity? Your opinion is important to us. Please fill out this [survey](#) or contact the Patient Education team at patienteducation@toh.ca



Do you need this information in a different format?

Please tell a member of your health-care team so that they can provide you with this information in a format that works for you. This resource is available in English and in French. Cette ressource est disponible en anglais et en français.



Booklet information

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