

NUTRITION MATTERS

IRON AND YOUR HEALTH

Iron is an important mineral that helps make red blood cells and carries oxygen to muscles and other cells.

Not eating enough iron-rich foods can be one cause of iron deficiency anemia.

While some people may not have signs or symptoms of iron deficiency others may experience:

- Brittle nails or hair loss
- Spoon-shaped fingernails
- Cold hands and feet or gets cold easily
- Dizziness or even fainting
- Tiredness and weakness
- Headaches or irritability
- Pica (craving to eat non-food items)
- Irregular or fast heartbeat
- Pale skin
- Shortness of breath during exercise
- Swelling of the tongue or inflammation inside the mouth
- Fast heartbeat

If you have any of these symptoms or think you may not be eating enough iron-rich foods, talk to your health care provider.

TWO TYPES OF IRON

Heme iron can be found in animal products like beef, chicken and fish. This type of iron is the easiest form of iron for your body to absorb.

Non-heme iron can be found in vegetables, whole grains, enriched or fortified grains, legumes, dried fruit and nuts. This type of iron is not as well absorbed by the body.

VEGAN AND VEGETARIAN IRON NEEDS

Since vegan diets and most vegetarian diets do not include animal products like meat, chicken or fish, iron needs are almost twice as high compared to diets that include animal products.

HELPING THE BODY ABSORB IRON

What you eat with non-heme iron foods can help your body to absorb the non-heme iron better. Serve non-heme foods with:

- A source of vitamin C (fruit, vegetables)
- Heme iron foods (meat, chicken or fish)

READING LABELS

Look for the percent daily value (% DV) on the Nutrition Facts table to compare or know if the product or food is:

- **A source of iron** - contains at least 5% DV (0.7 mg) of iron per serving
- **A good source of iron** - contains at least 15% DV (2.1 mg) of iron per serving
- **An excellent source of iron** - contains at least 25% DV (3.5 mg) of iron per serving

Note: 100% DV = 14 milligrams of iron

PUBLIC HEALTH

1-877-464-9675
TTY 1-866-512-6228
york.ca/nutrition

IRON SUPPLEMENTS

See your health care provider before taking an iron supplement – a blood test may be needed.

If a supplement is recommended, follow the instructions provided. Iron poisoning can lead to accidental death so keep supplements in a safe location, away from children.

FOODS THAT ARE A SOURCE OF IRON

Note: * = excellent source of non-heme iron

Meat (heme iron)

- Beef, veal, lamb and ham
- Certain fish (bass, herring, light canned tuna, Pacific mackerel, sardines, Rainbow trout)
- Chicken and dark-meat turkey

Meat alternatives (non-heme iron)

- Beans (white*, red*, lima, baked, navy)
- Certain nuts (almonds, cashews, hazelnuts, pistachios)
- Certain seeds (hulled pumpkin seeds, sesame seeds, hulled sunflower seeds)
- Chickpeas* and hummus
- Edamame (young, green soybeans)
- Eggs
- Lentils* and black-eyed peas
- Tahini (sesame butter)
- Tofu or tempeh

Grain products (non-heme iron)

- Certain fortified cereals (breakfast cereals*, instant cream of wheat)
- Oatmeal (instant*, quick oats)
- Fortified pasta (spaghetti, macaroni)
- Crackers (soda, oyster, saltine)
- Wheat germ
- White and whole wheat bread, pita or naan

Vegetables and fruit (non-heme iron)

- Beets and beet greens
- Canned pumpkin
- Dried longan (Asian dried fruit)

- Peas (green and snow)
- Prune juice
- Tomato sauce
- Spinach
- Sweet potatoes

Other (non-heme iron)

- Blackstrap molasses*
- Certain fortified almond, soy or pea-based beverages

Healthy foods like milk or milk products (yogurt and cheese) and most vegetables and fruit are not a source of iron.

IDEAS TO GET MORE IRON IN YOUR DIET

- Eat a source of iron at every meal and snack
- Add beans, chickpeas and lentils to casseroles, soups, stews and salads
- Choose tomato or meat sauces over cream sauces
- Replace traditional dips with hummus or bean dips
- Add strawberries or mandarin slices and sliced eggs to a spinach salad
- Make your own trail mix: hulled seeds and nuts, dried chickpeas and dried fruit
- Add wheat germ to cereal or to muffin, waffle, pancake and meatloaf recipes
- Instead of traditional breading for meat or fish, try making a sesame seed breading (there are recipes online for this)
- Cook with an iron skillet or wok which transfers some iron to the foods
- Search online for recipes using words like “iron rich recipes” or “recipes, iron”

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more information and additional nutrition resources, visit york.ca/nutrition or unlockfood.ca

To speak to a registered dietitian at no cost, call Telehealth Ontario at 1-866-797-0000.

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