



Iron and your health

Why is iron important?

Iron is a mineral that your body uses to make hemoglobin (pronounced “hee-muh-glow-bin”). Hemoglobin is found in your red blood cells and helps carry oxygen to all parts of your body. Without enough iron, your body will not have enough hemoglobin, and you may develop iron deficiency anemia (pronounced “ah-nee-me-ah”). Some symptoms of anemia are feeling tired all the time and getting sick more easily. Babies and children need iron for healthy growth and development, including brain development.

How much iron do I need?

The amount of iron you need depends on your age, sex, and whether you are pregnant or breastfeeding.

Recommended amount of iron per day:

Age (years)	Male	Female
1 to 3	7 mg	7 mg
4 to 8	10 mg	10 mg
9 to 13	8 mg	8 mg*
14 to 18	11 mg	15 mg
19 to 49	8 mg	18 mg
Over 50	8 mg	8 mg
Pregnancy	N/A	27 mg
Breastfeeding under 19	N/A	10 mg
Breastfeeding 19 and over	N/A	9 mg

mg = milligrams

*The recommended amount of iron for females at this age who menstruate is about 11mg per day.

Do some people need more iron?

Yes. Some people may need more iron than the amounts listed in the table above.

Vegetarians need to eat almost twice as much iron as people who eat meat, fish and poultry. The iron from plant foods is not absorbed by the body as well as iron from animal foods.

Females over the age of 50 who still menstruate can continue to follow the recommendations for females 19 to 49 years old. Females with heavy menstrual bleeding may need extra iron.

Frequent blood donors may need more iron depending on a variety of factors, including how often they donate.

Endurance athletes such as long-distance runners may need more iron because of the intensity of their activity.

If you think you need more iron, talk to your health care provider about your iron needs.

How do I get enough iron if I am pregnant?

Pregnant women need more iron to support the growth of their babies. If you are pregnant, choose iron-rich foods every day. Take a daily multivitamin/mineral supplement with 16 to 20 mg of iron. If your iron levels were low before getting pregnant, you may need to take even more iron. Talk to your health care provider about your iron needs.

How do babies get enough iron?

Most healthy babies are born with iron stores that will last about 6 months. Breast milk is the

only food babies need until 6 months of age. Continue to offer breast milk until your baby is 2 years or older. Babies who are not given breast milk should be fed a store-bought infant formula. Continue providing the formula until they are 9 to 12 months of age and are eating a variety of iron-rich foods.

At about 6 months, your baby needs more iron. Include iron-rich solid foods in your baby's diet every day starting at 6 months of age. These include iron-fortified infant cereal, meat, poultry, fish, egg, lentils, beans and tofu. Offer iron-rich foods 2 or more times each day. If your baby is not eating many iron-rich foods, talk to a registered dietitian.

For more information, see [HealthLinkBC File #69c Baby's first foods](#).

How can I get the most iron from food?

Food contains iron in 2 forms:

- *Heme* iron is found in meat, fish and poultry, and is easily absorbed by your body
- *Non-heme* iron is found in beans and lentils, whole grains, vegetables, fruits, nuts and seeds, and eggs, and is not absorbed as well by your body

You can absorb more non-heme iron from foods by eating them at the same time as foods with heme iron or foods high in vitamin C. Examples of foods high in vitamin C include: red, yellow and green peppers, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, snow peas, papaya, kiwi fruit, strawberries, oranges and grapefruit.

Try these food combinations to help you get the most iron:

- Iron fortified breakfast cereal (non-heme iron) with an orange or half a grapefruit (vitamin C)
- Split pea soup (non-heme iron) with some pork (heme iron)
- Salad made with spinach (non-heme iron) and strawberries or peppers (vitamin C)

- Lentils (non-heme iron), broccoli and red peppers (vitamin C) in tomato sauce
- Cook with cast-iron cookware to increase the amount of non-heme iron in foods.

Do not drink black tea, herbal tea or coffee with your meal. Wait 1 to 2 hours after eating. These beverages can reduce the amount of non-heme iron absorbed from foods.

Do I need an iron supplement?

In addition to eating iron-rich foods every day, some people may need iron supplements. Only take iron supplements when recommended by your health care provider.

Too much iron can be harmful, especially for infants and children. Always keep iron supplements, including multivitamins with iron, out of reach of children.

People with hemochromatosis absorb too much iron and should not take iron supplements.

If you take both calcium and iron supplements, do not take them at the same time. Calcium may decrease the amount of iron that is absorbed. Talk with your pharmacist or registered dietitian about the best time of day to take them.

For more information

For more information on iron, see [HealthLinkBC File #68d Iron in foods](#).

For more nutrition information, call **8-1-1** to speak with a registered dietitian.

For more HealthLinkBC File topics, visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca/healthfiles or your local public health unit. For non-emergency health information and advice in B.C. visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca or call **8-1-1** (toll-free). For the deaf and hard of hearing, call **7-1-1**. Translation services are available in more than 130 languages on request.