

Iron

What is iron?

Iron is a mineral that is important to all body cells. It is particularly important for blood cells because iron is needed to make hemoglobin. Hemoglobin is the protein in blood cells that carries oxygen to body tissues.

If you don't have enough iron you may develop iron deficiency anemia, a condition in which your blood contains less hemoglobin than normal. People who have iron deficiency anemia are often tired and lack energy.

Iron deficiency anemia may result from:

- ▶ a diet that lacks enough iron
- ▶ blood loss
- ▶ body changes during pregnancy.

How much iron do I need?

How much iron you need depends on your age and whether you are male or female. The recommendations are:

GROUP	MG IRON/DAY
Children 1 through 10 years old	10
Males 11 through 18 years old	12
Men over 18 years old	10
Premenopausal females over 11 years old	15
Postmenopausal women	10
Pregnant and breast-feeding women	15 to 30

What foods are good sources of iron?

Iron is found in a variety of foods. Heme iron is found in meat, poultry, and fish. Nonheme iron is found in fruits, vegetables, grains, nuts, and legumes. The body absorbs heme iron better than nonheme iron.

Food	Serving size	mg iron (approximate)
beef	3 oz	2.5
chicken, white	3 oz	0.8
chicken, dark	3 oz	1.1
lamb	3 oz	1.5
pork, loin	3 oz	0.7
pork, shoulder	3 oz	1.0
pork, leg	3 oz	0.6
turkey, white	3 oz	1.1
turkey, dark	3 oz	2.0
fish	3 oz	1.1
clams, raw	2 oz	8.0
shrimp	3 oz	2.6
liver, beef	3 oz	5.0
liver, chicken	3 oz	7.2
tofu, extra firm	4 oz piece	1.0
navy beans	1/2 cup	2.5
black-eyed peas	1/2 cup	4.0
garbanzo beans	1/2 cup	4.5
green peas	1 cup	2.5
lentils	1/2 cup	3.3
apricots, dried	10	1.7
dates	10	1.0
raisins	1/4 cup	1.0
prune juice	8 oz	2.7
green beans	1 cup	1.6
spinach	1/2 cup	3.2
potato, baked with skin	1	2.7
bagel	1	2.5
molasses, blackstrap	1 tablespoon	2.5
macaroni, enriched, cooked	1 cup	2.0
wheat germ, toasted	2 tablespoons	1.0

Many cereals and breads are fortified with extra iron. Check the labels.

Do I need an iron supplement?

If you get enough iron in your diet you don't need a supplement. Taking unnecessary supplements may be harmful. You can accumulate too much iron in your body, which can damage various organs.

If you have iron deficiency anemia, your health care provider may recommend a supplement. Some supplements cause constipation. Make sure you drink enough fluid and have enough fiber in your diet.

What foods affect the way the body absorbs iron?

Vitamin C (found in citrus fruits and tomatoes) helps the body absorb nonheme iron. Eating heme-iron-rich foods with nonheme-iron-rich foods helps increase absorption. Consuming coffee and tea (even decaffeinated), excess dietary fiber, or calcium supplements within 2 hours of eating iron-rich foods can decrease iron absorption.