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Good Food Sources of Iron



Many people, especially women of childbearing age, infants, and the elderly, do not take in enough iron. However, there are many good food sources of iron to choose from. If your doctor advises you to increase your iron intake, consult the chart below to determine how much you need, and read on for some suggestions on meeting those needs.

Here's Why:

Your blood depends on iron to help it carry oxygen through the body. In some cases, anemia is caused by a lack of iron in the diet. Iron also helps your body to fight infection and to make collagen, which is the major protein that makes up connective tissue, cartilage, and bone. Other medical conditions may be worsened if you do not have enough iron.

Recommended Intake:

Age Group	RDA (mg/day)	
	Male	Female
0-6 months	No RDA; AI = 0.27	No RDA; AI = 0.27
7-12 months	11	11
1-3 years	7	7
4-8 years	10	10
9-13 years	8	8
14-18 years	11	15
19-50 years	8	18
51+ years	8	8
Pregnancy	n/a	27
Lactation, < 18 years	n/a	10
Lactation, 19-50 years	n/a	9

Here's How:

Iron exists in two forms—heme and nonheme. Heme iron is part of the hemoglobin and myoglobin molecules in animal tissues. About 40% of the iron in meat is in the heme form. Nonheme iron comes from animal tissues other than hemoglobin and myoglobin and from plant tissues. It is found in meats, eggs, milk, vegetables, grains, and other plant foods. The body absorbs heme iron much more efficiently than nonheme iron.

Food Sources of Mostly Heme Iron (Contain Some Nonheme As Well)

Food	Serving size	Iron content (mg)
Oysters, pacific, cooked by moist heat	3 ounces	7.8
Beef liver, braised	3 ounces	5.8
Oysters, eastern, canned	3 ounces	5.7
Lean sirloin, broiled	3 ounces	2.9
Extra-lean ground beef, broiled	3 ounces	1.8
Tuna, canned in water, light, drained	3 ounces	1.3
Skinless chicken, roasted dark meat	3 ounces	1.1
Pork, lean, roasted	3 ounces	1.0
Skinless chicken, roasted white meat	3 ounces	1.0
Salmon, canned with bone	3 ounces	0.7

Food Sources of Nonheme Iron

Food	Serving size	Iron content (mg)
Fortified breakfast cereal	1 cup	4.5-18 (check Nutrition Facts label)
Pumpkin seeds	1 ounce	4.3
Soybean nuts	1/2 cup	4.0
Blackstrap molasses	1 tablespoon	3.5
Bran	1/2 cup	3.5
Spinach, boiled	1/2 cup	3.2
Red kidney beans, cooked	1/2 cup	2.6
Lima beans, cooked	1/2 cup	2.5
Cashews, dry roasted	1 ounce	1.7
Enriched rice, cooked	1/2 cup	1.2
Prunes, dried	5 prunes	1.1
Raisins, seedless	1/3 cup	1.1
Acorn squash, baked	1/2 cup cubes	1.0
Whole-wheat bread	1 slice	0.9
Egg yolk	1 large yolk	0.7
White bread, made with enriched flour	1 slice	0.7
Apricots, dried	3 apricots	0.6
Peanut butter, chunky	2 tablespoons	0.6
Cod, broiled	3 ounces	0.4

Tips For Increasing Your Iron Intake

The amount of iron your body absorbs varies depending on several factors. For example, your body will absorb more iron from foods when your iron stores are low and will absorb less when stores are sufficient. In addition, certain dietary factors affect absorption:

- Heme iron is absorbed more efficiently than nonheme iron.
- Heme iron enhances the absorption of nonheme iron.
- Vitamin C enhances the absorption of nonheme iron.
- Some substances decrease the absorption of nonheme iron. (Consuming heme iron and/or [vitamin C](#) with nonheme can help compensate for these decreases.)
 - Oxalic acid, found in spinach and chocolate. However, oxalic acid is broken down with cooking.
 - Phytic acid, found in wheat bran and beans (legumes)
 - Tannins, found in tea
 - Polyphenols, found in coffee
 - Calcium carbonate supplements

To increase your intake and absorption of dietary iron, try the following:

- Combine heme and nonheme sources of iron.
- Eat foods rich in vitamin C with nonheme iron sources. Good sources of vitamin C include:
 - Bell peppers
 - Papayas
 - Oranges and orange juice
 - Broccoli
 - Strawberries
 - Grapefruit
 - Cantaloupe
 - Tomatoes and tomato juice
 - Potatoes
 - Cabbage
 - Spinach and collard greens
- If you drink coffee or tea, do so between meals rather than with a meal.
- Cook acidic foods in cast iron pots. This can increase iron content up to 30 times.

Resources:

American Dietetic Association
<http://www.eatright.org/Public/>

Australian Iron Status Advisory Panel
<http://www.ironpanel.org.au/>

The Vegetarian Resource Group
<http://www.vrg.org/>

References:

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Perspectives in Nutrition . 2nd ed. Mosby-Year Book, Inc.; 1993

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