

Why is Iron Important in My Diet?

What is iron?

Iron is a mineral in the human body. It is one of the parts of hemoglobin, the substance in red blood cells that helps blood carry oxygen throughout the body.

If you do not have enough iron, your body cannot make hemoglobin, and you may get anemia, a health problem that occurs when there is not enough hemoglobin in the blood. When you get anemia, you are said to be "anemic".

What are the signs of anemia?

The major signs of anemia are:

- Feeling tired
- Problems breathing
- Dizziness
- Headache
- Feeling cold

What causes anemia?

A low level of iron is the most common cause of anemia. This is known as iron-deficiency anemia, the most common type of anemia. Causes that can reduce the body's iron levels are:

- Blood loss (caused by ulcers, some cancers, and other health problems)
- In women, during monthly periods
- An iron-poor diet
- An increase in the body's need for iron (for example, during pregnancy).

A person can develop iron-deficiency anemia. But the following groups have a higher risk:

- Women, because of blood loss during monthly periods and giving birth.
- People over 65, who are more likely to have diets that are low in iron.
- People who are on blood thinners such as aspirin, Plavix[®], Coumadin[®], or Heparin[®].

- People who have kidney failure (especially if they are on dialysis), because they have trouble making red blood cells.
- People who have trouble taking in iron.

Can iron-deficiency anemia be treated?

Yes. This type of anemia can be treated and cured. First, your doctor will find out if the anemia is being caused by a poor diet or a more serious health problem. Then, you can be treated for both the anemia and its cause. Iron-deficiency anemia is treated with iron supplements taken by mouth, or by eating foods that are high in iron.

What foods are high in iron?

The iron in food comes from two sources: animals and plants. Iron from plants is found in vegetables and in iron-added to foods such as breakfast cereals. Iron from meat is better absorbed by the body than from plants.

However, if you do not wish to eat a lot of animal foods, there are other foods listed that you can try. In particular, plant foods that have a lot of iron are:

Vegetables: Leafy greens such as broccoli, spinach, kale, turnip greens, and collards, potatoes with the skin, lima beans, green peas, and all other beans (e.g. kidney, black, navy, etc.), and tomato sauce.

Fruits: Dried apricots, dried figs, raisins, prunes, and prune juice.

Breads, Cereals

Rice & Pasta: Iron fortified whole grain breads, pastas, rice, and cereals. Read food labels and look for breads and cereals that have 20% or more of the Daily Value for iron.

Nuts/Seeds: Nuts and seeds such as peanuts, cashews, sunflower seeds, walnuts, almonds, etc.

Other: Blackstrap molasses (try it on hot cereal such as oatmeal Malt O Meal®, or Cream of Wheat®)

Another great way to get more iron into your food is to cook with cast iron pots and pans. Cast iron pots and pans are very heavy. They will rust if not dried after washing. If you cook acidic foods such as tomato sauce in cast iron, you can greatly increase the iron content of these foods.

Also, it might be good for you to take an iron supplement; if you're not already doing so. Talk to your doctor to make sure that there are no reasons you should not take an iron supplement. Iron can also be given as an infusion. Your doctor will decide how to best treat your iron deficiency.

If you do take a supplement, make a note of which type of iron it contains. Some forms of iron are much better absorbed than others. The supplemental forms of iron that are best absorbed are:

- Ferrous sulfate
- Ferrous gluconate
- Ferrous ascorbate
- Ferric ammonium citrate

Iron forms that are NOT well absorbed are:

- Ferrous fumarate
- Ferrous succinate
- Ferric saccharate

If you choose to take an iron supplement, look for one that has ferrous sulfate, ferrous gluconate, ferrous ascorbate, and/or ferric ammonium citrate.

There are other things you can do help your body absorb iron better. Keep these things in mind when you decide how and when to eat foods that are high in iron and/or if you are taking an iron supplement:

- Foods and beverages that are high in vitamin C will increase iron absorption. So, orange juice (**without** calcium) is a good beverage to use when taking an iron supplement or eating foods that are high in iron.
- Foods that are high in calcium will decrease iron absorption. So, do not take an iron supplement or eat high iron foods with milk. Also, make sure that your orange juice is NOT calcium fortified if you are going to take your iron with orange juice.
- Coffee, tea, and cola will decrease iron absorption. So, do not take an iron supplement or eat high iron foods with coffee, tea, or cola.
- Very high fiber cereals, such as All Bran or Raisin Bran will decrease iron absorption. So, do not take your iron supplement at the same time as eating these high fiber cereals.
- Calcium in supplements will decrease iron absorption. So, do not take an iron supplement or eat high iron foods at the same time as calcium supplements.

You do not need to totally avoid the foods that decrease iron absorption. It is fine to add these foods to your diet. Just make sure that you don't eat them at the same time that you're also taking an iron supplement or eating high iron foods. Leave at least an hour between the foods and beverages that decrease iron absorption and when you take an iron supplement or eat high iron foods.

If you are going to take an iron supplement, the best way to take it is between meals with a glass of juice.

If iron supplements upset your stomach or make it hard for you to have a bowel movement (constipation), try taking a Slow Release form of iron. Look for

an iron supplement that's called "Slow Fe" or "Slow Iron". These often cause less stomach upset and constipation than standard iron supplements.

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