

Iron and Health



Iron is a mineral that helps make red blood cells and carries oxygen to the muscles, lungs and other cells. Babies and young children need iron for healthy growth and development.

Not eating enough iron can be one cause of low iron levels, which can lead to iron deficiency or iron deficiency anemia (IDA). This can lead to poor concentration and lower immune function. For babies and young children, IDA can impact growth, as well as cognitive and motor development, leading to learning difficulties.

Common symptoms of IDA include:

- Weakness
- Loss of energy or feeling tired
- Dizziness or light-headedness
- Shortness of breath
- Pale skin
- Headaches

Talk to a health care professional if you think iron levels may be low.

Older Babies and Iron

Babies are born with iron stores that last about six months. Once babies start solid foods at about six months of age, their iron needs can be met by:

- Introducing iron-rich foods as their first solid foods (e.g., iron-fortified infant cereals, meat or plant-based proteins like beans or lentils)
- Continuing to offer iron-rich foods at least twice daily. Once they are 12 months, offer a source of iron at each meal
- Waiting until 9-12 months to offer cow's milk as their main milk

Getting More Dietary Iron

Getting enough dietary iron can help to reduce the risk for developing iron deficiency or IDA. Here are some foods that are sources of iron:

Protein foods

- Beans (white, red, lima, baked, navy)
- Beef, veal, lamb and ham
- Certain fish (bass, herring, light canned tuna, Pacific mackerel, sardines, rainbow trout), bones removed
- Certain nuts* (almonds*, cashews*, hazelnuts*, pistachios*)
- Certain seeds* (hulled pumpkin seeds*, sesame seeds, hulled sunflower seeds*)
- Chicken and dark-meat turkey
- Chickpeas and hummus
- Edamame (young, green soybeans)
- Eggs
- Lentils and black-eyed peas
- Tahini (sesame butter)
- Tofu and tempeh

Whole grains

- Certain fortified cereals (dry breakfast and infant cereals, cream of wheat)
- Oatmeal (instant, quick oats)
- Fortified pasta (spaghetti, macaroni)
- Wheat germ
- Whole wheat bread, pita or naan

Vegetables and fruit

- Beets and beet greens
- Canned pumpkin
- Dried longan* (Asian dried fruit)
- Peas (green, snow)
- Tomato sauce
- Spinach
- Sweet potatoes

Other sources of iron

- Blackstrap molasses

*Choking hazard for children under four years of age.

Foods that are not a Source of Iron

- Milk – drinking too much milk can cause low iron levels. For children 12 months and older that are not breastfeeding, offer up to two cups (500 mL) of milk per day
- Most vegetables and fruit
- Rice - includes rice-based traditional foods like congee, even when made with meat
- Yogurt, cheese and other milk products

Helping the Body Absorb Iron Better

Vitamin C helps absorb the iron in plant-based foods, such as beans, lentils and grains. Since most fruit and vegetables are a source of vitamin C, include them with plant-based meals and snacks.

Animal sources of iron also helps absorb the iron in plant-based sources so if eating meat, poultry or fish, include vegetables, beans, lentils or grains.

Reading Nutrition Facts Table

Other food products or beverages may be fortified with iron. Look for the % daily value (DV) per serving on the nutrition facts table when shopping to compare or know if the product or food has:

- A lot of iron - contains 15% or more DV
- A little iron - contains 5% or less DV

Iron Supplements

If iron-rich foods are not eaten regularly, talk to your health care professional before supplementing with iron – a blood test may be needed.

If an iron supplement is recommended, follow the instructions. To prevent iron poisoning, keep supplements in a safe and locked location, away from children.

Iron Containing Cookware and Devices

Using a cast-iron skillet or wok to cook can transfer some of its iron to the foods. Cast-iron cookware that is ceramic coated does not transfer iron to the food.

A reusable iron ingot (iron-shaped fish) is marketed as a device which can transfer iron into the water when cooking however, they are not recommended due to possible exposure to heavy metals, such as arsenic or lead.

Tips to get More dietary iron

- Include protein foods that are sources of iron several times each day
- Add plant-based proteins like beans, chickpeas and lentils to casseroles, soups, stews and salads
- Choose tomato or meat sauces over white or cream sauces
- Replace traditional dips with hummus or bean dips
- Replace regular potatoes with sweet potatoes when mashing or making fries
- Add strawberries or mandarin slices and sliced eggs to a spinach salad
- Make a trail mix with hulled seeds and nuts, dried chickpeas and/or dried fruit
- Add infant cereal, wheat germ and ground nuts or seeds to muffin, pancake, burger or meatloaf recipes
- Look for recipes using blackstrap molasses
- Double or triple the meat or fish in congee recipes
- Try a sesame seed breading for chicken or fish (there are recipes online for this)
- Search online for recipes using words like “iron rich” or “high iron”

For more information

Visit www.smdhu.org/ChildHealthyEating

Contact **Health811**, 24 hours, 7 days/week to speak to a registered nurse or registered dietitian, at no cost.

Call **811** or toll free **1-866-797-0000** or live chat at ontario.ca/health811



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