

Iron in your diet



Why is iron important?

Iron is needed by the body to help make haemoglobin. Haemoglobin or 'Hb' is the protein found in red blood cells that carries oxygen around the body and gives blood its red colour.

What can happen if you have low iron levels?

Lack of iron can result in anaemia, which can cause you to feel tired, weak, irritable and breathless.

For some people there is a greater risk of having low iron levels. These include:

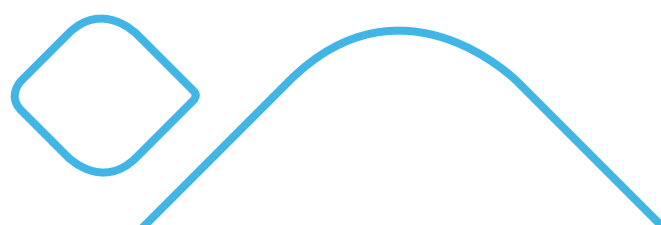
- Babies
- Young children
- Teenagers (particularly girls)
- Women who have heavy periods
- People who give blood regularly
- Vegetarians and vegans
- Athletes

If your iron levels are low, it is important to include iron-rich foods as part of your daily diet. This leaflet focuses on iron in adults.

How much iron do I need?

Your dietary iron requirement will differ depending on your age and gender. The table lists the recommended daily intakes for adults in the UK:

Population Group	Recommended Daily Intake
Males 11-18 years	11.3mg
Males 19+ years	8.7mg
Females 11-50 years (pre-menopause)	14.8mg
Females 50+ years (post-menopause)	8.7mg



Which foods are good sources of iron?

The following foods are particularly good sources:

Animal sources:

- Liver/pate*
- Lean red meat
- Game meats (e.g. venison, duck, goose)
- Chicken and Turkey
- Oily fish
- Eggs

Animal sources contain **haem iron** which is more easily absorbed by the body

Plant based sources:

- Nuts
- Seeds
- Pulses
- Lentils
- Dark green leafy vegetables
- Dried fruit
- Fortified breakfast cereals and bread

Plant based sources contain **non-haem iron** which is harder for the body to absorb.

*Liver is not recommended for pregnant women because of its high vitamin A content.

More information is given on the next page.

Absorption of iron

As well as eating an adequate amount of iron containing foods, it is also important to help the body absorb the iron we consume, particularly if opting for sources of non-haem iron.

You can **increase** absorption of non-haem iron by:

- Having a source of vitamin C with your meal; for example tomatoes or bell peppers within the meal itself or by having a small glass of orange juice to drink alongside.
- Having a source of haem iron within the meal as well; this is helpful, for example, if you do eat red meat but are trying to reduce consumption (e.g. reducing minced beef in chilli and replacing with extra kidney beans)
- Avoiding tea and coffee around mealtimes as these drinks contain compounds called tannins that can **decrease** the absorption of iron from the diet.
- Avoiding consumption of large quantities of bran containing cereals as these contain phytates which can **decrease** the absorption of iron from the diet.

Vegetarians and vegans

Although iron from plant based sources is more difficult for the body to absorb, a balanced and varied diet should still be able to provide adequate amounts of iron.

Including some of the foods listed on this information sheet and following the steps detailed above will help.

Your doctor, nurse or midwife may be able to provide additional advice and you can also be referred to a dietitian if needed.

Food	Portion – <i>Approximate weight</i>	Iron (mg)
Meat and Fish		
Liver (lamb's) *	120g/4oz (raw weight)	9
Liver paté *	60g/2oz (average serving)	3.5
Beef, stewing steak or mince	150g/5oz (raw weight)	3
Beefburgers	2 x 60g/2oz burgers (raw weight)	3
Corned beef	60g/2oz (2 thin slices)	1.5
Chicken	120g/4oz (2-3 slices, cooked)	1
Turkey	120g/4oz (2-3 slices, cooked)	1
Venison	150g/5oz (average steak, cooked)	7.6
Duck	120g/4oz (2-3 slices, cooked)	2.5
Goose	120g/4oz (2-3 slices, cooked)	4
Salmon	100g/3½ oz (average fillet) (raw weight)	1
Sardines in tomato sauce	90g/3oz (3 sardines)	3
Egg	1 medium/large	1
Cereals, Bread and Grains		
Ready Brek	30g/1oz (small bowl)	4
Fortified breakfast cereals	30g/1oz (small bowl)	2.4-4.2
Weetabix	2 biscuits	4.5
Bread – wholemeal	1 medium slice	1
Brown rice	130g/4½oz (cooked)	0.5
Quinoa	130g/4½oz (cooked)	3.5
Beans and Pulses		
Baked beans	180g/6oz (small can)	2
Red kidney beans (canned)	100g/3½oz (3 tablespoons)	2
Whole lentils (green/brown)	30g/1oz raw, (60g/2oz boiled - 1½ heaped tablespoons)	2
Split red lentils	60g/2oz raw 120g/4oz boiled (3 tablespoons)	3
Hummus	60g/2oz (2 tablespoons)	1
Tahini Paste	30g/1oz (1½ heaped teaspoons)	3
Nuts and Seeds		
Sunflower/Pumpkin seeds	10g/½oz	0.5
Fruits and Vegetables		
Curly Kale	90g/3oz (cooked) medium portion	2
Baby spinach	90g/3oz (cooked) medium portion	2.5
Broccoli (purple sprouting)	90g/3oz (cooked) medium portion	1
Dried figs	40g/1½ oz (2 figs)	1.5
Dried prunes	60g/2oz (6 prunes)	1.5
Dried fruit (sultanas, raisins, dates, apricots)	30g/1oz (1 tablespoon)	0.5 – 1.5
Other sources		
Tofu	90g/3oz	1
Chocolate – plain, milk	60g/2oz bar	1.5 – 1
Curry sauce (canned)	150g/5oz (average portion)	1.5
Wine – red	150ml glass	1.5

Peanut butter	30g/1oz (average spread on 2 slices of bread)	0.5
Mixed nuts	30g/1oz (small packet)	0.5
Peanuts, cashew nuts	(10 whole nuts)	0.5
Cocoa, drinking chocolate	15g/½oz (1 heaped teaspoon)	0.5

* Liver is not recommended for pregnant women because of its high vitamin A content.

Please note the quantities above are approximate.

Do I need to take iron supplements?

Most people can obtain adequate iron from their diet, if taking good sources and aiding absorption. If you choose to take a daily iron supplement that is not prescribed by your doctor, check the dosing: the NHS website (link below) advises that taking 17mg or less a day of iron supplements is unlikely to cause any harm.

If your iron levels are very low your doctor may recommend you take a higher dose iron supplement. Some people report side effects from iron supplements including constipation and nausea. If you experience any of these, speak to your doctor as an alternative treatment may be available.

If you have haemochromatosis, speak to your doctor before following the advice in this leaflet.

Other sources of information

- British Dietetic Association: <https://www.bda.uk.com/resource/iron-rich-foods-iron-deficiency.html>
- NHS: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/vitamins-and-minerals/iron/>

Contact details: **Nutrition and Dietetic Services** Tel: (01225) 824398 (RUH)

Tel: (01225) 833916 (St Martin's)

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Please contact the Patient Support and Complaints Team (PSCT) if you require this leaflet in a different format, or would like to feedback your experience of the hospital.

Email ruh-tr.psct@nhs.net or telephone 01225 825656.

Date of publication: October 2023

Review: October 2026

Ref: RUH Iron/028 (DTT/006)

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