

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.

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 in the UK:

Population Group	Recommended Daily Intake (mg)
1-3 years	6.9
4-6 years	6.1
7-10 years	8.7
Males 11-18 years	11.3
Males 19-50 years	8.7
Females 11-50 years	14.8
50+ years	8.7

Which foods are good sources of iron?

The following foods are particularly good sources:

- Liver/pate*
- Lean red meat
- Game meats (e.g. venison, duck, goose)
- Chicken and Turkey
- Oily fish
- Nuts and seeds
- Pulses and Lentils
- Eggs
- Dark green leafy vegetables
- Dried fruit
- Fortified breakfast cereals
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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.

- Vitamin C can **increase** absorption of iron from the diet. Aim to have vitamin C rich foods with your meals; for example fresh fruits and vegetables, or drinks such as fresh orange juice.
- Tea and coffee contain compounds called tannins that can **decrease** the absorption of iron from the diet. Try to avoid these at meal times.

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
Cereals, Bread and Grains		
Branflakes	30g/1oz (small bowl)	6
Ready Brek	30g/1oz (small bowl)	4
Fortified breakfast cereals	30g/1oz (small bowl)	Average 2.5
Weetabix	1 biscuit	1.5
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.

Vegetarians and vegans

Although iron from non-meat 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.

Do I need to take iron supplements?

If your iron levels are very low your doctor may recommend you take an iron supplement.

Iron supplements should only be taken on the advice of a doctor. 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.

Other sources of information

If you have access to the internet the following websites can provide further information:

- British Dietetic Association: www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts
- The Food Standards Agency: www.eatwell.gov.uk
- NHS Choices: <http://www.nhs.uk/Pages/HomePage.aspx>
- UK Transfusion Services: <http://www.transfusionguidelines.org.uk/index.aspx>



Please note:

There is little risk of getting too much iron from food, however you can overdose with supplements which can be harmful. Please follow the manufacturers recommendations.

Contact details:

Nutrition and Dietetic Services

Tel: (01225) 824398 (RUH)

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

Royal United Hospitals Bath NHS Foundation Trust
Combe Park, Bath BA1 3NG 01225 428331 www.ruh.nhs.uk

Please contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) if you require this leaflet in a different format, or would like to feedback your experience of the hospital. Email ruh-tr.PatientAdviceandLiaisonService@nhs.net or telephone 01225 825656.