

Iron and Your Health

Your body needs iron to help carry the oxygen in your blood through your body. Without enough iron, you will tire more easily and be less able to fight off infections. Babies and children also need iron for healthy brain development.

You need more iron during childhood, adolescence, and pregnancy. Vegetarians, athletes, and women who have menstrual periods also need more iron.

How much iron do I need?

Your iron needs will change throughout your life.

Daily Recommended Intake for Iron		
Age (years)	Male (mg)	Female (mg)
7 months to 1 year	11	11
1 to 3	7	7
4 to 8	10	10
9 to 13	8	8
14 to 18	11	15
19 to 50	8	18
Over 50	8	8
Pregnancy (all ages)	-	27
Breastfeeding:		
under 18	-	10
18 to 50	-	9
Vegetarian:		
14 to 18	20	27
19 to 50	14	32
Over 50	14	14

Some people need more iron

Vegetarians

Vegetarians need more iron because iron from plant foods (non-heme iron) is not absorbed as well as iron from animal foods (heme iron).

- Choose several iron-rich foods each day.

Pregnant Women

You need more iron when you are pregnant.

- Take a multivitamin that has **16–20 mg** of iron every day.
- Eat a healthy diet.

Athletes

Athletes who compete in long-distance sports like marathons, triathlons, and cycling may need more iron than non-athletes.

- Choose several iron-rich foods every day.

Other people who may need more iron:

- people who donate blood often
- people with digestive problems such as celiac disease
- women taking hormone replacement therapy
- women with heavy menstrual periods

Iron in food

Only some of the iron in food is absorbed by your body. There are two types of iron in foods:

- heme iron: found in meat, poultry, and fish
- non-heme iron: found in eggs and plant foods such as legumes, vegetables, fruit, grains, nuts, and iron-fortified grain products



Heme iron in meat, fish, and poultry is absorbed best.

How do I increase the iron in my diet?

- Eat a variety of healthy foods each day.
- Choose foods that are sources of iron. See the list of *Food Sources of Iron* on this page.
- Vitamin C helps your body absorb more iron.
 - Cook high iron foods together with foods high in vitamin C.
 - Eat foods high in vitamin C at each meal.
 - Good sources of vitamin C include berries, broccoli, cabbage, cantaloupe, cauliflower, grapefruit, honeydew, kale, kiwis, lemons, oranges, peppers, potatoes, tomatoes, and juice fortified with vitamin C.
- Add dried beans, peas and lentils to soups, salads, casseroles, chili, and sauces.
- Add molasses, nuts, or dried fruit (raisins, dates, or apricots) to cereals and baked goods.
- Choose whole grains and cereals fortified or enriched with iron.
- Cook in cast-iron cookware to increase the amount of iron in foods.
- Drink tea or coffee between meals instead of with meals. Tea and coffee can reduce the amount of iron your body absorbs.



Food sources of iron

At least 3.5 mg iron per serving

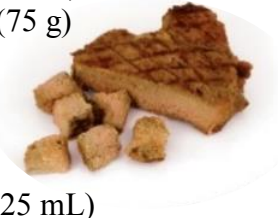
- Chickpeas or lentils, cooked, ¾ cup (175 mL)
- Cold cereal, enriched, 30 g
- Hot cereal, enriched, cooked, ¾ cup (175 mL)
- Liver (beef, chicken, or pork)*, 2½ oz (75 g)
- Molasses, blackstrap, 1 Tbsp (15 mL)
- Moose, 2½ oz (75 g)
- Mussels or oysters, 2½ oz (75 g)
- Pumpkin seed kernels, roasted, ¼ cup (60 mL)
- Soybeans, mature, cooked, ¾ cup (175 mL)



* Liver is high in vitamin A. Pregnant women should limit the amount of liver they eat.

At least 2.1 mg iron per serving

- Amaranth, cooked ½ cup (125 mL)
- Beef, elk, or venison, 2½ oz (75 g)
- Chard or spinach, boiled, ½ cup (125 mL)
- Chia, flax, or sesame seeds, ¼ cup (60 mL)
- Lima beans, boiled, ½ cup (125 mL)
- Red kidney beans, cooked, ¾ cup (175 mL)
- Sardines, canned, 2½ oz (75 g)
- Tofu, firm, ¾ cup (175 mL)
- Wheat germ, ¼ cup (60 mL)



At least 0.7 mg iron per serving

- Almond, cashew, peanut, or sunflower butter, 2 Tbsp (30 mL)
- Asparagus or green peas, boiled, ½ cup (125 mL)
- Bagel, ½ (52 g)
- Beets, canned, ½ cup (125 mL)
- Bread, enriched, 1 slice (35 g)
- Chicken, lamb, or pork, 2½ oz (75 g)
- Clams, canned, 2½ oz (75 g)
- Dried figs, 5
- Eggs, 2
- Light canned tuna, 2½ oz (75 g)
- Oatmeal, pasta, or quinoa, cooked, ½ cup (125 mL)
- Potato, baked with skin, ½ medium
- Pumpkin, cooked/canned, ½ cup (125 mL)
- Split peas, ¾ cup (175 mL)



Iron amounts are from the Canadian Nutrient File 2015.

What about iron supplements?

Iron supplements are **not** for everyone. Don't take iron supplements unless your doctor tells you to. Only take the type and amount of iron prescribed by your doctor.

If your doctor has prescribed both iron supplements and calcium supplements, talk to your pharmacist or dietitian about the best time to take them.

Caution: Too much iron is toxic.

Always keep iron supplements and multivitamins with iron out of children's reach!