

Healthy Eating Tips: All about Iron Before and During Pregnancy

Getting enough iron can be a challenge for women, especially during pregnancy. You need more iron to make the extra blood needed for pregnancy and to support your developing baby.

Iron Basics

Iron is essential for carrying oxygen to all body cells and for brain development in early life. A lack of it can lead to iron deficiency anemia and some serious health effects. You may look pale, feel very tired and more likely to get colds and infections. You may have a craving for non-food items such as dirt, ice or cornstarch. Low iron is associated with low birth weight and early delivery. For infants and young children, a lack of iron can result in problems with learning and behaviour.

The Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA) for Iron

The amount of iron you need each day is listed in the table. It is difficult to get the amount of iron needed for a healthy pregnancy from food alone. Pregnant women should eat according to Canada's Food Guide and take a multivitamin that contains 16-20 mg of iron. Vegetarians have higher iron needs because iron found in plant based foods is not well absorbed. Vegetarian women should speak with their health care provider early in their pregnancy about their specific iron needs.

Age years	Iron Needed Daily (milligrams)
Before and Between Pregnancies	
14 - 18*	15
19 - 30**	18
31 - 50**	18
PREGNANCY***	27
Breastfeeding	
<18 y	10
19 - 50 y	9
* Vegetarians need 27 mg daily	
** Vegetarians need 32 mg daily	
*** Vegetarians need 27-45 mg as tolerated	

Higher intakes of iron can cause upset stomach, constipation, or diarrhea. If this happens, speak with your health care provider.

Food Sources of Iron

The iron in food comes in two forms:

- **HEME iron**, found in meat, fish and poultry is the type of iron absorbed best by the body. Since vegetarians do not eat these foods they often have difficulty getting enough iron.
- **NON HEME iron**, found in foods such as eggs, whole grains, nuts, seeds and legumes is another type of iron. It's not as easily absorbed compared to heme iron. See the flip side for **Tips for Getting the Most Iron from Foods**.

Top Choices for Iron

- Red meat – beef, lamb
 - Clams, oysters
 - Beans, lentils, split peas
 - Enriched, ready-to-eat breakfast cereal
 - Black strap Molasses
 - Other meat, poultry, fish
 - Liver and kidney*
 - Prune juice
 - Dried fruit – apricots, figs, raisins
 - Nuts – almonds, brazil nuts, cashews, hazelnuts, peanuts
 - Seeds – pumpkin, squash, sesame
 - Egg
 - Whole wheat bread
- * Liver and other organ meats are rich in iron but are not recommended during pregnancy.



No Iron Here

Dark green vegetables such as spinach, Swiss chard and beet greens contain iron but it is not well used by the body. Iron in these foods is bound with other dietary substances such as oxalate and polyphenols making it unavailable. Go ahead and enjoy dark green vegetables for the other nutrients they provide – just don't count on them for iron!

Tips for Getting the Most Iron from Foods

To increase the non-heme iron absorbed at each meal:

- Include a food rich in vitamin C at every meal. The vitamin C found in juice, citrus fruit (orange or grapefruit), cantaloupe or other melon, strawberries, broccoli, pepper, and potato helps the body use non-heme iron.
- Include some meat, poultry and fish with non-heme iron foods. A factor in these foods promotes the absorption of the non-heme iron.
- Avoid coffee and tea for one to two hours before or after eating. Coffee reduces iron absorption by 35% and tea cuts it by 60%.
- Use iron-enriched pasta. Check the label as many imported brands are not enriched.



High Iron Combos

Try some of these higher iron combos to keep your iron intake healthy.

Breakfast Ideas:

- enriched ready-to-eat breakfast cereal topped with dried fruit and ½ grapefruit*
- poached egg, 2 slices whole wheat toast with ½ cup orange juice*

Lunch Ideas:

- roast beef sandwich on whole wheat bread with green pepper strips*
- split pea soup, whole wheat bun and ¼ melon*

* All these foods are sources of vitamin C.

Dinner Ideas:

- enriched pasta with meat sauce served with broccoli*
- baked beans with lean ham, whole grain toast and tomato juice*

Snack Ideas:

- nuts with an orange*
- peanut butter on whole wheat bread with apple juice*
- whole wheat crackers and cheese with strawberries*
- hummus (chickpea spread) with whole wheat pita and pineapple*



CAUTION!

Always take extra care to keep iron supplements out of the reach of young children. Iron supplements are a common cause of accidental poisoning in the home and can be fatal.

Want more information on A Healthy Start for You and Your Baby? Visit our Web site at www.pdhu.on.ca. Or call Health Line at 519-271-7600 ext 267 or 1-877-271-7348 ext 267.