

Iron - What You Need To Know

Who needs it?

Growing young children, teens (especially female), pregnant women need more iron.

If you have lost a lot of blood (like women with monthly menstrual cycles), you need more iron. Others who run the risk of not having enough iron in their diets are the elderly, dieters and vegetarians. Young children who drink too much milk may be low in iron because all the milk they drink doesn't leave room in their diets for other foods that are good sources of iron.

What does iron do in the body?

Most importantly, it carries oxygen in your blood throughout your body. Not enough iron can cause anemia - symptoms include tiredness, paleness, headaches.

What foods are good sources of iron?

- meat (especially red meats), fish, poultry
- green leafy vegetables like broccoli, spinach, kale
- dried beans and peas
- iron-fortified breakfast cereals
- dried fruit like raisins, prunes, apricots

To help your body absorb more of the iron in the food you eat:

- eat foods high in Vitamin C, like orange juice, potatoes, tomatoes with foods that have iron in them (an example: breakfast cereal and orange juice)
- eat a small amount of meat together with plant sources of iron (examples: meat, vegetable stir-fry; beef and bean burrito; chili (with meat) and beans)
- drink coffee, tea, cocoa or cola drinks at different times than meals (they decrease how much iron you absorb)
- take calcium pills at a different time than when you eat foods with iron or when taking an iron pill (calcium decreases how much iron you absorb)

What about iron cookware? Acid foods, like spaghetti sauce, cooked in cast iron pots and pans, may contain iron from the cookware. However, many things can affect how much iron is in the food - i.e. less cooking time, a cast iron pan coated with oil releases less iron into cooked food.

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- References:
1. Anderson, Jennifer. Iron- an essential nutrient, Colorado State University Coop. Ext., 7/96
 2. The PDR Family Guide to Nutrition and Health, Medical Economics Co., 1995

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