

What Does Iron Do?

Your body needs iron to make hemoglobin, the part of your red blood cells that carries oxygen throughout your body. Every cell in your body needs iron to make energy. Not eating enough iron can lead to iron-deficiency anemia.

People with a higher risk for iron-deficiency anemia include:

- Women who are pregnant or have heavy menstrual losses.
- Teenage girls.
- People with kidney failure or gastrointestinal problems.
- People who exercise intensely on a regular basis.
- People who have pica. People with this condition crave and eat nonfood items (such as clay, dirt, or cornstarch), which may block iron from being absorbed in the body.

How Much Iron Do You Need?

The amount of iron you need each day is measured in milligrams (mg). Here are some general recommendations for healthy people. You may need more or less iron depending on your health.

- Teenage girls (ages 14–18 years): 15 mg iron per day (27 mg if pregnant; 10 mg if breastfeeding)
- Teenage boys (ages 14–18 years): 11 mg iron per day
- Women (ages 19–50 years): 18 mg iron per day (27 mg if pregnant; 9 mg if breastfeeding)
- Older women (ages 51+ years) and all men (ages 19 years and older): 8 mg iron per day

How Much Iron Is Too Much?

Over time, eating too much iron may result in health problems. Teens older than 14 years and adults should consume no more than 45 mg iron per day.

Types of Iron

There are two kinds of iron in food:

- **Heme iron** is found in animal foods such as beef, poultry, pork, and fish. Heme iron is easier for your body to absorb.
- **Non-heme iron** is found in plant foods such as dark green vegetables and whole grains. Also, some foods are fortified with this type of iron during food processing.

Tips for Getting More Iron

- Avoid coffee and tea for 1 hour after eating. These drinks contain tannic acid, which blocks iron absorption.
- Cook foods in an iron skillet.
- Eat iron-enriched rice. Don't rinse it before cooking.
- If you take both iron supplements and calcium supplements, do not take them at the same time. By taking them a few hours apart, your body will absorb more of both.
- To help your body use non-heme iron, have a food rich in vitamin C at the same time. (Vitamin C helps your body absorb non-heme iron.) For example, top iron-enriched cereal with berries.
- Add a food with heme iron to meals that include non-heme iron. (This helps your body absorb the non-heme iron.) For example, add lean beef or chicken to a stir-fry with spinach and iron-fortified rice.



Which Foods Have Iron?

Foods with Heme Iron

Food	Serving Size	Iron (mg)
Beef tenderloin, cooked	3 ounces	3
Ground beef (90% lean), cooked	3 ounces	2.7
Turkey (dark meat), cooked	3 ounces	2
Turkey (light meat), cooked	3 ounces	1.2
Chicken breast, cooked	3 ounces	1.1
Pork loin, cooked	3 ounces	0.8
Tuna, canned in water	3 ounces	0.8
Egg, scrambled	1 large egg	0.7

Foods with Non-heme Iron

Food	Serving Size	Iron (mg)
100% iron-fortified ready-to-eat cereal	$\frac{3}{4}$ cup	18
Fortified instant oatmeal, made with water	1 cup	10
Soybeans, cooked	1 cup	8.8
Lentils, cooked	1 cup	6.6
Kidney beans, cooked	1 cup	5.2
Tofu, firm	$\frac{1}{2}$ cup	3.4
Spinach, cooked	$\frac{1}{2}$ cup	3.2
Potato, baked and skin	1	2.2
Iron-enriched white rice, cooked	$\frac{1}{2}$ cup	1.6
Raisins	$\frac{1}{2}$ cup	1.5