



Iron in your diet

Why is iron important?

Iron is very important because it helps your body to make haemoglobin. Haemoglobin, or 'Hb', is the protein found in red blood cells that carries oxygen around your body and gives blood its red colour.

What can happen if you have low iron levels?

If the level of iron in your body falls, your red blood cells may not contain enough haemoglobin. At first you may not notice any difference, however, if the amount of haemoglobin falls further, you can start to feel tired. If the shortage of iron is more severe, you can feel unusually weak or breathless. This is called anaemia.

There are different types of anaemia, but the most common is caused by a shortage of iron.

Getting enough iron will help your body to work more efficiently and may speed your recovery following surgery.

Where does iron come from?

You can usually get enough iron from a balanced diet as it is found in a variety of foods. In the UK the major sources of iron in our diet are cereal and cereal products, meat and meat based foods and vegetables. We need a regular supply of iron in our diet as it is not easily absorbed by the body.

What causes low iron levels?

If you do not eat enough foods containing iron, your iron levels may be low. Vegans and vegetarians need to take particular care to ensure that they get enough iron in their diet as it is less easily absorbed by the body from non meat sources.

Sometimes, blood loss – for example during an operation – will result in a loss of iron.

Girls and women who have heavy periods are more at risk of low iron levels because of their monthly blood loss. Pregnancy can cause women to have low iron levels.

Young children may also have low iron levels. Please speak to your doctor or practice nurse for advice regarding iron in the diet if you have a baby or a young child.

Which foods are good sources of iron?

A varied and balanced diet should provide an adequate iron intake. The following foods are particularly good sources of iron:

- Lean red meat
- Turkey and chicken
- It is well known that liver is rich in iron, but liver is NOT recommended for pregnant women because of its high Vitamin A content
- Fish, particularly oily fish which can be frozen or canned (such as mackerel, sardines and pilchards)
- Eggs
- Breakfast cereals – some cereals have been 'fortified' with iron
- Pulses and beans – in particular canned baked beans, chickpeas and lentils
- Nuts (including peanut butter) and seeds
- Brown rice
- Tofu
- Bread, especially wholemeal or brown bread
- Leafy green vegetables, especially curly kale, watercress and broccoli
- Dried fruit in particular dried apricots, raisins and prunes

Vitamin C (sometimes called ascorbic acid) may help the body to absorb iron, so to get the most from the food you eat, have Vitamin C rich foods with meals; for example, fresh vegetables or fruit, or drinks such as fresh orange juice.

A note about tea! Tea may reduce the absorption of iron from foods. Avoid drinking tea directly before, after or with meals and only drink tea in between meals.

What if I am vegetarian or vegan?

Although iron from non-meat sources is more difficult for the body to absorb, people following a well-balanced diet should be able to get enough iron in their diet. Including some of the foods listed and following the advice above will also help.

Your doctor, nurse or midwife can give you further advice. If needed, you can be referred to a dietician.

What can you do to boost your iron levels?

- Try to eat a well-balanced diet especially if you are pregnant or if you are waiting for an operation
- If you know you have had low iron levels in the past, ask your doctor, nurse or midwife – they can arrange a blood test to check your haemoglobin and iron level

Correcting a shortage of iron may reduce the chances of you needing a blood transfusion.

Do I need to take iron tablets?

Most people should be able to get all the iron they need by eating a varied and balanced diet and should not need to take iron supplements or iron tablets.

If the level of iron in your body is very low your doctor may recommend you take a tablet containing iron.

- Iron tablets should only be taken if your doctor has advised you to do so
- Iron tablets can cause constipation or nausea (feeling sick) in some people. Speak to your doctor if you experience any side effects.

Additional sources of Information

If you are interested in finding out more about iron and have access to the Internet, you may find the following websites useful:

The Food Standards Agency:
www.eatwell.gov.uk

National Patient Safety Agency (NPSA) 'Please Ask' Patient Information leaflet on Blood Transfusion and surgery:
www.npsa.uk/pleaseask

The Welsh Blood Service:
www.welshblood.org.uk

The National Blood Service
www.blood.co.uk

This information leaflet for patients and the public has been produced as part of a National Transfusion Awareness Campaign in 2007 with assistance from the Food Standards Agency, the British Dietetic Association and the Department of Nutrition and Dietetics at the Barts & London NHS Trust.

Additional copies of this leaflet can be obtained from the Welsh Blood Service

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