

Dietary sources of iron

Role of iron

Iron helps the body in many important processes. For example, it is an essential part of haemoglobin, the red pigment in our blood that allows it to carry oxygen around the body.

If iron levels are low, the amount of haemoglobin in our red blood cells, as well as the number of red blood cells, is reduced. This is called anaemia.

Symptoms include tiredness and lethargy, difficulty concentrating and a shortened attention span.

All the tissues and cells in the body depend on oxygen to function properly; if they receive less oxygen, they won't work so well.

Iron requirements

Age	Iron (mg) per day
6-12 months	7.8
1-3 years	6.9
4-6 years	6.1
7-10 years	8.7
11-18 years- boys	11.3
11-18 years- girls	14.8

Foods containing iron

Red meat is the richest source of iron. The iron in animal sources is absorbed easily by the body.

There is also iron in pulses (such as lentils and beans), dried fruit, green leafy vegetables, nuts and seeds, and in fortified breakfast cereals. The iron in these foods is not so easily absorbed by the body.

Vitamin C might help us to absorb iron. So, try having a glass of orange juice with a meal, or lightly cooked vegetables such as broccoli, Brussels sprouts, green peppers or potatoes all of which are good sources of vitamin C.

Tea and coffee contain compounds, called polyphenols, which can bind with iron making it harder for our bodies to absorb it, so cutting down on tea and coffee could help to improve iron levels in the body.

Foods rich in iron

Meat and alternatives

Red meat – e.g. beef, lamb, pork, corned beef, bacon.

Minced meat dishes eg: spaghetti bolognese, cottage pie, meat balls

Offal – e.g. liver, kidney (have no more often than once a fortnight due to high vitamin A content)

Duck and other game birds

Eggs

Sardines, pilchards, tuna, salmon, mackerel, molluscs (clams, mussels, oysters)

Pulses – lentils, peas and beans (including baked beans, soybeans, kidney beans and tofu)

Nuts and seeds e.g. peanut butter, ground almonds, cashew nut, pine nut and hazelnut, sesame seeds and hummus, pumpkin and squash seeds

Starchy foods

Fortified breakfast cereals (Check on the packet that iron has been added)

Bread - wholemeal contains more iron than white, Pitta bread, Chappati

Wheat, gram or Bajra flour, Oatmeal, Quinoa, Barley, Brown rice

Fruit and vegetables

Dark green leafy vegetables - e.g. spinach, swiss chard, watercress, broccoli

Dried fruit - e.g. dried apricots, prunes, peaches, figs, dates, sultanas and raisins.

Food	Serving size	Iron supplied (mg)
1 thick slice roast beef or lamb	45g	1.2-1.3
1 average slice ham/ gammon joint	25g	0.4
Bolognese sauce – small portion	120g	1.9
Shepherd's pie – small portion	180g	2.0
Fried lambs liver – 1 slice	40g	4.0
1 canned sardine (oil drained)	25g	0.7
½ average steamed salmon steak	50g	0.4
Boiled egg	60g	1.2
3tbsp baked beans	120g	1.7
Lentils – cooked masur dahl – 1tbsp	40g	0.7
Quinoa – cooked – 1 tbsp	40g	0.6
Firm tofu – 1 slice	30g	0.8
Hummus – 1tbsp	30g	0.6
Peanut butter – thickly spread on 1slice bread	20g	0.4
Fortified breakfast cereals	30g	2.4-3.8
Wholemeal bread – 1 average slice	36g	0.9
Spinach – 1 tbsp	40g	1.6
Broccoli – small portion	60g	0.6
Sultanas/ raisins – 1tbsp	30g	0.5
Dark chocolate – bite size	10g	1.7

Meal and snack ideas

The following suggestions for meals and snacks can help to boost your iron intake. They include foods that are rich in iron and foods that might help your body absorb it. Try to include a range of these foods over the week and also aim for 5 portions of fruit and vegetables a day.

Breakfast

- fortified breakfast cereal, such as wholewheat biscuits with milk
- wholemeal toast with peanut butter
- poached egg, baked beans, grilled tomato and mushroom, wholemeal toast
- a glass of orange or grapefruit juice

Lunch

- dark chicken and ham salad (watercress, chicken thigh meat, ham, tomatoes, grated carrot)
- sardines or baked beans on wholemeal toast
- bean salad (chickpeas, red kidney beans, butter beans, onion, olive oil, garlic, lemon juice, cucumber, tomato)
- pitta bread with hummus, red pepper and celery
- egg Florentine (spinach, egg and cheese) with wholemeal toast
- smoked salmon and scrambled egg bagel
- ham or peanut butter sandwiches

Dinner

- beef or vegetable stir-fry
- low-fat grilled beef burger or veggie burger in a bun with baked beans and oven chips
- minced meat dishes e.g. spaghetti Bolognese or chilli con carne and rice with lamb or beef mince, peas and kidney beans (for a vegetarian option use soya mince and lentils)
- red meat and bean stews, soups, casseroles or curries with potato and green vegetables
- nut roast, potatoes, spinach and broccoli

Supper

- fortified breakfast cereal with milk

Snacks

- almonds
- dried apricots or raisins
- small bar of dark chocolate
- slice of gingerbread cake
- small flapjack

Children

Milk is not a rich source of iron. By the age of 1 year a child needs only 1 pint of milk or equivalent (1 yogurt or 1oz cheese = 1/3pt milk) a day. Too much milk fills a child up and then they will not eat enough food.