

NUTRITION STRATEGIES TO INCREASE BLOOD IRON LEVELS

What is Iron and Why is It Important?

Iron is an important mineral used by red blood cells to carry oxygen to all cells in your body.

A low blood iron level may be a cause for a low hemoglobin level. Symptoms of a low hemoglobin may be:

- Fatigue
- Dizziness
- Headaches
- Weakness

Eating iron rich foods can increase your iron levels to help reduce anemia symptoms and fight infection.

There are two different types of iron in food: heme and non-heme. Heme iron is found in animal sources and is better absorbed by the body. Non-heme iron is found in plant-based foods.

The Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA) of iron is:

- 8 mg a day for **men** (19+ years)
- 18 mg a day for **women** (19-50 years)
- 8 mg a day for **women** (51+ years)

What Can Influence Iron Absorption?

Vitamin C helps your body absorb iron. Adding Vitamin C rich foods as part of your meal will increase non-heme iron absorption. Foods high in Vitamin C include:

- Citrus fruits/juices (oranges, grapefruit, lemon, lime)
- Bell peppers
- Tomatoes
- Kiwi
- Broccoli
- Kale
- Strawberries
- Pineapple

Tannins are naturally occurring compounds in foods and beverages that contribute to their taste and mouth feel. While tannins may play a role in protection against heart disease and some cancers, they may also interfere with the absorption of non-heme iron acting as “anti-nutrients”. Foods high in tannins include:

- Tea
- Coffee
- Unripe Fruit
- Chocolate
- Legumes (such as lentils and chickpeas)

Limiting tannins and including foods high in Vitamin C with iron rich foods can help increase your iron levels.

Here are some examples of foods high in iron:



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Food High in Heme Iron

Meat and Eggs	Serving Size	Iron (mg) per serving
Organ products all animals (liver, kidney, heart)	3 oz	4.8-10
Beef	3 oz	2.4-3.5
Turkey	3 oz	1.9
Chicken	3 oz	1.5
Pork	3 oz	1.3
Veal	3 oz	1.0
Lamb	3 oz	2.3
Eggs (including yolk)	1 large	0.88

Seafood and Fish	Serving Size	Iron (mg) per serving
Clams	3 oz	6-10
Oysters	3 oz	6-10
Shrimp	3 oz	2-3
Sardines	3 oz	3.0
Anchovies	3 oz	3.0
Tuna	3 oz	2.0
Mackerel	3 oz	2.0

Foods High in Non-Heme Iron

Legumes and other foods	Serving Size	Iron (mg) per serving
Beans, canned or dried (garbanzo, kidney, black, cowpeas)	8 oz	4.4-6.6
Soybeans	8 oz	8.8
Lentils	8 oz	6.6
Lima beans	8 oz	4.5
Tempeh	8 oz	4.4
Hummus	4 oz	3.0
Tofu	6 oz	3.5
Nuts	1 oz (~28 almonds, 45 pistachios, 28 peanuts, 16 cashews, 14 walnut halves)	0.7-1.1
Pumpkin, sesame, hemp, flaxseeds	2 tablespoons	1.2-4.2

Vegetables	Serving Size	Iron (mg) per serving
Seaweed, spirulina, dried	½ cup	16
Spinach (cooked)	1 cup	6.4
Peas, edible-podded (cooked)	1 cup	3.0
Collards (cooked)	1 cup	2.2



Vegetables	Serving Size	Iron (mg) per serving
Tomato paste	½ cup	3.9
Tomato sauce	1 cup	2.3
Potato with skin	1 medium size	2.5
Sweet potato	1 medium size	2.0
Succotash (corn and lima beans)	1 cup	1.5
Swiss chard (raw)	1 cup	0.7
Broccoli (raw)	1 cup	0.7
Brussel Sprouts	1 cup	0.7

Fruit	Serving Size	Iron (mg) per serving
Dried fruit (Goji berries, apricots, prunes, raisins, figs)	½ cup	1.5-3.2
Passion fruit	1 cup	3.7
Tamarinds	1 cup	3.4
Plantains	1 plantain	0.8
Sapodilla	1 cup	1.9
Carissa	1 cup	1.9
Orange	1 cup	1.3
Soursop	1 cup	1.3
Blackberries, raspberries	1 cup	0.8
Jackfruit, cantaloupe, watermelon, papaya	1 cup	0.4

Grains and Cereal	Serving Size	Iron (mg) per serving
Bran flakes cereal	1 cup	11
Oatmeal, enriched	1 cup	14
Quinoa	1 cup	2.8
Pearled barley	1 cup	2.1
Oat bran	1 cup	1.9
White long grain, enriched	1 cup	1.9
Bulgur	1 cup	1.7
White pasta, enriched	1 cup	1.6
Wild rice	1 cup	1.0
Brown rice	1 cup	0.8
Whole wheat bread	1 slice	0.8
Enriched white bread	1 slice	0.8
Couscous	1 cup	0.6

Helpful Resources

<https://www.redcrossblood.org/donate-blood/blood-donation-process/before-during-after/iron-blood-donation/iron-rich-foods.html>

<https://www.eatright.org/health/wellness/preventing-illness/iron-deficiency>

<https://ods.od.nih.gov/factsheets/Iron-Consumer/>

<https://fdc.nal.usda.gov/index.html>

