

Iron: a key nutrient during pregnancy



The mineral iron plays a vital role in a variety of body functions. Iron is stored in hemoglobin (which carries oxygen to tissues) and plays a role in the formation of red blood cells. Iron deficiency anemia is the most common nutritional deficiency and can poorly affect mother and fetus.

During pregnancy, your need for iron nearly doubles as your blood volume expands to accommodate changes in your body. Your baby's blood cells are formed from the additional iron.

Recommended amount

Pregnant women are advised to get 27 milligrams of iron a day (up from 18 milligrams before pregnancy).

Iron deficiency

If you or your prenatal caregiver are concerned that you aren't getting enough iron, you can take a blood test called a hemoglobin and hematocrit. Most obstetricians check for this between 24-28 weeks of gestation. If you are carrying multiples, we recommend checking earlier at 14-28 weeks because the requirements for iron and risks for anemia are higher. If you aren't getting enough iron or you are losing too much iron, you may be at risk for iron deficiency anemia.

Symptoms of insufficient iron (iron deficiency anemia):

- Pale skin (pallor)
- Weakness
- Fatigue
- Headache
- Dizziness (vertigo)
- Drowsiness
- Irritability
- Difficult or labored breathing (dyspnea)
- Cold hands and feet
- Unusual cravings for non-nutritive substances such as ice or clay (also called pica)

How to add iron to your daily diet

You can add iron to your diet by eating a wide variety of foods. There are two different types: heme (found in meat products) and non-heme (found in plants).

- Heme iron:
 - Absorbed better than non-heme
 - Found in foods such as meat, poultry, fish and shellfish (for those trying to lower cholesterol, choose lean cuts of meat and non-heme sources of iron)
 - Richest sources include beef liver, chicken liver and oysters
- Non-heme iron:
 - Best absorbed when eaten with a source of vitamin C such as citrus fruit

- Sources include fruits, vegetables, grains, eggs, dairy products, firm tofu, dried beans, dark leafy greens, whole grain and enriched breads, cereals, pasta, bulgur, black strap molasses, prune juice and dried fruits
- Richest sources of non-heme iron are fortified cereals and tofu
- Cooking food in iron cookware also adds iron
- Infant cereals are fortified with iron

To help your body absorb more iron from the foods you eat:

- Eat vitamin C foods and juices (such as citrus fruits, strawberries, cantaloupe and broccoli) with non-heme iron.

Supplements

Although most prenatal vitamins contain iron, in some cases, your health care provider may recommend an additional iron supplement.

Avoid eating or drinking caffeine or milk products with iron supplements.

See our handy chart of healthy sources of iron on the reverse side.

Food sources for heme and non-heme iron

	Excellent Sources (5 milligrams of iron or greater per serving)	Good Sources (Approximately 3 milligrams of iron per serving)	Fair Sources (Less than 3 milligrams of iron per serving)
Heme iron Meat	Beef and chicken liver, cooked – 3 oz Oysters, canned – ½ cup (Avoid raw during pregnancy)	Most lean beef and veal, cooked – 3 oz	Fish – 3 oz Chicken – 3 oz
Non-heme iron Cereals Grains Beans Vegetables Fruits	Iron-fortified cereals with 45% or more of the daily requirement of iron – 1 ounce (oz) Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 100% Bran • Cheerios (regular and crunch) • Chex (Rice, Corn, *Wheat, *Multi Bran, Honey Nut, Strawberry and Chocolate) • Cornflakes • *Cream ofWheat • Farina • *FQuaker Oatmeal Squares (brown sugar, cinnamon and golden maple) • Life • Kellogg’s Bran Flakes • Kix • Total • Wheaties <p>* = Greater than 50% of the daily value F = 5 grams of fiber per serving or more</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spinach (fresh) cooked – 1 cup 	Iron-fortified cereals with 25% or more of the daily requirement of iron – 1 ounce (oz) Most legumes – 1 cup <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Baked beans • Garbanzo beans • Great Northern beans • Kidney beans • Navy beans • Pinto beans <p>Soybeans, boiled – 1 cup Tofu – 1 cup Spinach, canned – 1 cup Blackstrap molasses – 1 tablespoon</p>	Iron-fortified cereals with 10% or more of the daily requirement of iron – 1 ounce (oz) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bagel – 1 whole • Tortilla – 1 (6 inch diameter) • Enriched breads, rice, macaroni and pasta – 1 oz • Baked potato – 1 medium • Spinach, raw – 2 cups • Spinach (frozen), cooked – 2 cups • Prunes, apricots, figs (dried) – 1 cup • Raisins – ½ cup • Prune juice – ½ cup • Mango – 1 medium

www.mypyramid.gov – 1 ounce of iron-fortified cereal is equivalent to 1 cup of cereal