



Iron deficiency and diet

Iron is a mineral found in many foods that is important for good health. Your body uses iron to make haemoglobin, a protein in red blood cells that carries oxygen to all parts of your body and iron also plays a key role in your immune system. A severe iron deficiency is called iron deficiency anaemia.

Symptoms

If you have iron deficiency, some common symptoms include:

- Tiredness and lack of energy
- Shortness of breath
- Noticeable heartbeats (heart palpitations)
- Pale skin

You may also be more susceptible to infections, brittle nails, thinning hair, itchy skin and mouth sores or ulcers.

Food sources of iron

Some foods contain more iron than others.

- Red meats and offal are rich sources of iron and well absorbed by the body. Other meats such as fish and poultry also contain iron. These are known as "haem iron" sources.
- Plant sources include legumes (beans, peas, lentils), dark green leafy vegetables (spinach, kale, broccoli), some fruits (especially dried fruit), vegetables, nuts and seeds, and fortified grain products such as flour, pasta and breakfast cereals. These are known as "non-haem iron" sources. Eggs are also a non-haem source of iron.

Iron absorption

Haem iron sources are better absorbed by our body than non-haem sources.

Your body can better absorb non-haem iron sources when eaten alongside a haem iron source, or with a source of vitamin C at the same time, such as citrus fruits, juices, strawberries, potatoes, peppers, broccoli or tomatoes.

Some foods make iron more difficult for your body to absorb. These are foods that contain phytates (bran-containing cereals) or tannins (tea and coffee).

How much Iron Should I Aim For?

Population group Daily	iron requirements
Adolescent males (11-18)	11.3mg
Adult males (19+)	8.7mg
Females 11-50 years (pre-menopause)	14.8mg
Adult females (post-menopause)	8.7mg

Some people may have higher iron requirements, such as if you menstruate, are pregnant or breastfeeding.

How to get enough iron with plant-based diets

Foods such as beans, vegetables, fortified breakfast cereals and grains contain iron. You should aim to eat a source of Vitamin C with meals and avoid drinking tea and coffee immediately before and after main meals.

The following tables list foods that are sources of iron.

Food (haem iron) sources	Iron per 100g
Animal-based sources	
Beef (rump steak)	3.6mg
Beef mince (stewed)	2.7mg
Pork chop (grilled)	0.7mg
Lamb leg (roasted)	1.8mg
Chicken (roasted, light meat)	0.7mg
Liver pate	5.9mg
Sausages (pork)	1.1mg
Back Bacon (grilled)	0.6mg
Eggs (fried)	2.2mg
Fish-based sources	
Cod/Haddock (baked)	0.1mg
Salmon (steamed)	0.4mg
Mackerel (grilled)	0.8mg

Prawns (boiled)	1.1mg
Tuna (canned in brine)	1.0mg
Plant-based sources	
Baked beans (in tomato sauce)	1.4mg
Butter beans (canned)	1.5mg
Chickpeas (boiled)	2mg
Kidney beans (canned)	2mg
Tofu (steamed)	1.2mg
Fruit, nuts and seeds	
Figs	3.9mg
Apricots	3.4mg
Dates	1.3mg
Almonds	3mg
Brazil nuts	2.5mg
Peanut butter (smooth)	2.1mg
Hazelnuts	3.2mg
Sesame seeds	10.4mg
Sunflower seeds	6.4mg
Vegetables	
Broccoli (boiled)	1mg
Spinach (boiled)	1.6mg

Iron is an important mineral that we need to have in our daily diet. Aim to choose a variety of iron containing foods to ensure adequate iron intake.