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Iron

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Most of the iron in our bodies is in the hemoglobin (the oxygen-carrying protein of the red blood cells). Since most of our iron is in the blood, iron losses are greatest whenever blood is lost. Therefore, women of childbearing age usually are more deficient in iron than men. The most common indication of iron deficiency is anemia. With iron-deficient blood you may feel tired or sluggish and will be less able to fight off infections.

Iron in foods occurs in two forms: heme and nonheme. Heme iron (the most readily absorbed form) is found in meats, poultry, and fish. "Red" meats are higher in iron than "white" meats.

How Much Iron Do You Need?

The National Research Council (1989) recommends these population groups consume the following amounts of iron daily:

Infants age 0-6 months	6 milligrams
Children age 6 months-10 years	10 milligrams
Teenage boys	12 milligrams
Teenage girls and women	15 milligrams
Adult men and postmenopausal women	10 milligrams
Postmenopausal women who are on estrogen replacement therapy	15 milligrams

How Can You Get the Iron You Need?

Iron deficiency is usually caused by inadequate nutrition. Eating a variety of foods that contain iron is the best way to get an adequate amount of iron. The ability of the body to absorb and use iron from different foods varies. The iron in meat, poultry, and fish is absorbed and utilized more readily than iron in other foods. Consuming even a small amount of these animal products will increase the absorption of iron from other iron containing foods.

Eating foods rich in vitamin C (ascorbic acid) such as broccoli or citrus fruits at a meal will help increase iron absorption. Many health care providers recommend feeding an iron-fortified milk formula or breakfast cereal or giving an iron supplement to infants and toddlers. Doctors may prescribe iron supplements for pregnant women because it is especially difficult to meet their iron needs.

The list of foods that follows will help you select foods that are good sources of iron. To determine the amount of iron you are eating, follow these steps:

1. Write down all the foods you have eaten and the amount of each for the past 24 hours.
2. Check to see which of those foods appear in the following iron-rich foods chart.
3. For those foods which do appear on the list, write down the number of milligrams of iron supplied by that food.
4. Add the total number of milligrams to determine your iron intake.
5. Compare your iron intake to the recommended number of milligrams according to your age and gender (opposite).
6. Were the foods you ate in the past 24 hours typical of your daily diet? Do you need to include more iron-rich foods in your daily diet? If so, change your diet accordingly.

Iron Content of Selected Foods

FOOD	MG	FOOD	MG
4.6 to 6.3 milligrams (mg)			
Oatmeal (fortified) instant, 1 packet	6.3	Pumpkin or squash seeds, 1 ounce	4.2
Ready-to eat cereals (fortified), 1 ounce	1.8-4.5*	Tofu, regular, 1/2 cup	4.0-6.0**
1.0 to 2.7 milligrams (mg)			
Apricots halves, dried, 1/4 cup	1.5	Bagel, 1 medium	1.8

Beans, dry, cooked, 1/2 cup	1.4- 2.7***	Beef, cooked, ground, lean, 3 ounce patty	1.8
Beef, roasted, lean, 3 ounces	1.8	Braunschweiger, 1 ounce	2.6
Chicken, roasted, dark meat, 3 ounces	1.2	Clams, canned, 3 ounces	2.6
Ham, cured, roasted, lean, 3 ounces	.8	Lamb, cooked, lean only, 3 ounces	1.7
Lentils, cooked, 1/2 cup	2.1	Muffin, bran, 1 medium	1.4
Noodles, cooked, 1 cup	2.6	Pork chop, fresh, broiled, lean only, 3 ounces	.8
Prunes, cooked, 1/2 cup	1.2	Sardines, Atlantic, canned, 3 ounces	2.6
Shrimp, canned, drained, 3 ounces	1.4	Shrimp, fried, 3 ounces (7 medium)	2.0
Trout, baked or broiled, 3 ounces	1.0	Tuna, canned, chunk light, 3 ounces	1.6
Turkey, cooked, dark meat, 3 ounces	2.0	Turkey, cooked, light meat, 3 ounces	1.1

less than 1 milligram (mg)

Bread, whole wheat or plain, 1 slice	.7	Chicken, cooked, light meat, 3 ounces	.9
Dates, whole, 5	.5	Egg yolk, cooked, 1	.6
Peanut butter, 2 tablespoons	.6	Peas, green, frozen (cooked), 1/4 cup	.6
Pretzel, soft, 1	.3	Raisins, seedless, 3 tablespoons	.6
Rice, cooked, 1/2 cup	.9	Romaine lettuce, chopped, 1 cup	.8
Tomato juice, 1/2 cup	.7	Tuna, canned, solid white, 3 ounces	.6
Salmon, canned (pink), solids & liquids, 3 ounces	.7		

* Dry and cooked cereals vary in iron content. Check labels for amounts.

** Check labels for amounts. Brands vary in iron content.

*** Dry beans such as pinto, Great Northern, and kidney beans.

Resource: USDA Nutritive Value of Foods, 1991

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