

Introduction

Iron is an essential mineral that is needed to carry oxygen through the blood to your cells and to your baby. During pregnancy, the volume of blood in your body increases and so does the amount of iron you need. If you don't have enough iron stores or get enough iron during pregnancy you could develop iron-deficiency anaemia (low iron). Anaemia can cause symptoms of fatigue, weakness, dizziness, shortness of breath and pica (craving non-food items).



Sources of iron

There are two types of iron available in food (haem iron and non-haem iron).

Haem Iron is more easily absorbed by the body. This is generally found in red meat (beef, pork, lamb). It is important to note that *liver is not recommended to be eaten during pregnancy due to high levels of vitamin A* which can be harmful to the baby.

Non-haem iron is less-well absorbed by the body, nevertheless, it is still a very important source of iron. It is mainly found in eggs, green leafy vegetables (broccoli, cabbage), pulses (beans, peas, lentils) and foods fortified with iron e.g. breakfast cereals. Eating foods that contain vitamin C (berries, fruit juices, vegetables, salads) can help with the absorption of non-haem iron.

Iron supplements. Your doctor may prescribe iron supplements if you are low in iron.

Foods that contain phytates (high fibre, bran-containing cereals) or tannins (tea and coffee) can reduce iron absorption.

Foods that Enhance/ Reduce Iron Absorption

Enhance	Reduce
Vitamin C containing foods (berries, oranges, kiwis, broccoli, peppers, cauliflower, kale, fruit juices)	Bran cereals (All-Bran, Branflakes)
Red meat (beef, lamb, pork, mutton, black pudding)	Tea and coffee

How to Increase Your Iron Intake

Try to eat iron rich foods twice daily.

Include non-haem iron sources with a source of vitamin C to help absorption.

Avoid drinking tea or coffee or eating high-bran cereals within 30 minutes of eating an iron rich food or taking iron supplements.

Iron Rich Meals

Beef stir fry with peppers, broccoli and rice.

Spaghetti bolognese.

Eggs on toast with mushrooms and wilted spinach.

Fortified breakfast cereal with milk and berries.

Beans on toast with a glass of orange juice.

How Can Vegans & Vegetarians get enough Iron?

Beans, vegetables and wholegrains are a source of non-haem iron. It is important to ensure you are including good sources of vitamin C with your meals to aid iron absorption.

Avoid drinking tea and coffee with meals and try to choose iron-fortified milk or plant-based milk alternatives and breakfast cereals that are fortified with iron where possible.



Iron Supplements

If your iron levels are low following a blood test, you might be recommended to take an iron supplement to help increase your iron levels. If you are taking an iron supplement try to take this 30-60 minutes after a meal as this can help with the absorption.

A common side effect of iron supplements is constipation. If you are suffering with constipation consider increasing your fibre by aiming for at least 5-7 portions of fruit and vegetables every day and try adding more lentils, beans, nuts and seeds into your diet. When you increase your fibre intakes, it's important that you also increase your fluid intakes. Aim for 10-12 glasses of water a day. Increasing movement and physical activity can also be helpful for relieving symptoms of constipation. It is recommended to aim for 150 minutes of physical activity per week during pregnancy.

If after adopting these changes you are still struggling with constipation, consider speaking with your medical team to discuss alternative options available.

Dietetic Department

Tel: 057 86 96258



Midland Regional Hospital Portlaoise

INFORMATION LEAFLET

Department of Nutrition & Dietetics

Getting Enough Iron in Pregnancy



Version 1 2023