

Iron

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Key points:

- Iron is essential for life.
- Women in their reproductive years have a much higher iron requirement.
- Iron is found in a variety of animal and plant-based food sources.
- Certain foods and drinks can affect how much iron the body absorbs.

Iron is essential for life

Iron is an important mineral found in a range of foods. It helps to transport oxygen around the body, making iron essential for life!

Iron is also important for optimal immune function, providing energy and storing oxygen in our muscles (this is what gives muscles their red colour).

How much iron do I need?

Iron requirements differ by gender and age. Please see the below table for recommended dietary intake per day:

Age group	Recommended dietary intake (RDI) ¹
All	
1-3 years	9mg/day
4-8 years	10mg/day
9-13 years	8mg/day
Boys	
14-18 years	11mg/day
Girls	
14-18 years	15mg/day
Men	
19+ years	8mg/day
Women	
19-50 years	18mg/day
50+ years	8mg/day

Age group	Recommended dietary intake (RDI) ¹
Pregnant and lactating women	
All pregnant women	27mg/day
Lactating women 14-18 years	10mg/day
Lactating women 19+ years	9mg/day

Women in their reproductive years have a much higher iron requirement than men, due to monthly menstruation. Women in this life stage can find it difficult to meet their daily requirements with food alone, which means they also have a higher risk of iron deficiency.

Women are advised to have their iron levels regularly checked by their GP, who may recommend further dietary measures or an iron supplement. The RDI for men is much lower than for women in their reproductive years. For example, a man could get his RDI for iron by simply having a serve of wholegrain iron-enriched breakfast cereal, a serve of red meat and handful of nuts in one day.

Remember:

- Iron helps to transport oxygen in the body, making iron essential for life.
- Iron requirements differ by age and gender.
- Women in their reproductive years have much higher iron requirements and as such, should have their iron levels checked regularly by their GP.

Symptoms of iron deficiency

- Fatigue
- Lack of concentration
- Increased risk of infection
- Headache
- Pale skin
- Weakness/Dizziness

Who is at risk of iron deficiency?

- Women in reproductive years
- Young children
- Pregnant women
- Vegetarians
- Vegans

Which foods contain iron?

There are two types of iron that we can get from foods:

1. Iron from animal sources – haem iron
2. Iron from plant-based sources – non-haem iron

Haem iron from animal sources is absorbed more efficiently and in a different way to non-haem iron.

Animal-based iron sources

Food	Iron content (per 100g)
Chicken liver	11mg
Beef	3.5mg
Kangaroo	3.2mg
Lamb	2.5mg
Salmon	1.28mg
Tinned tuna	1.07
Pork	0.8mg
Chicken	0.4mg
Snapper	0.3mg

Plant-based iron sources

Food	Serving size	Iron content
Weetbix™	30g	4.2mg
All Bran™	30g	3.2mg
Kidney beans	1 cup	3.1mg
Green lentils	1 cup	3.0mg
Tofu	100g	2.96mg
Chickpeas	1 cup	2.7mg
Cooked wholemeal pasta	140g (1 cup)	2.3mg
Cashew nuts	30g (20 nuts)	1.5mg
Raw spinach	1 cup	1.2mg
Rolled oats	30g	1.1mg
Almonds	30g	1.1mg
Dried apricot	30g (5 dried apricots)	0.93mg
Broccoli	1 cup	0.86mg
Cooked brown rice	140g (1 cup)	0.7mg
Wholegrain bread	1 slice	0.4mg

How can I improve my iron intake?

Some foods can help our bodies absorb iron, while others can inhibit it.

To ensure your iron is being absorbed we recommend that you:

- Eat foods high in vitamin C with foods that contain iron.
- Cook your plant foods to improve the amount of available iron.
- Avoid having tea, coffee or calcium during or directly after having a source of iron.
- Speak to your doctor about any possible dietary interactions with your medications or herbal supplements that could impair iron absorption.

Ensure that you only take iron supplements under the advice of a GP, as too much iron can also be harmful.

Remember:

- Haem iron from animal sources is absorbed more efficiently and in a different way to non-haem iron.
- Some foods can help our bodies absorb iron, while others can inhibit it.
- Only take supplements under the guidance of a GP.

¹ Source: <https://www.nrv.gov.au/nutrients/iron>