

How to Increase Iron in Your Diet

Iron is a mineral that our bodies need for producing energy and for building red blood cells, which carry oxygen. Too little iron, or iron deficiency, can result in fatigue, weakness, poor exercise tolerance, loss of appetite and/or decreased ability to fight infection. Only a fraction of the iron we eat is absorbed. If your doctor or Registered Dietitian has told you to increase the amount of iron in your diet, here are some guidelines, along with some tips to help increase absorption.

- **Focus on the right type of iron.** Iron comes in two forms, heme and non-heme. Heme iron is the most easily absorbed form and is found in red meat, dark meat poultry (legs and thighs), liver, pork, and fish. Remember the MFP factor: **meat, fish, poultry**. The body absorbs two to three times more iron from animal sources than from plant sources.
- **Fruits, vegetables, nuts, fortified cereals, grains, rice, egg yolks, and beans** are good sources of non-heme iron, but this form is more difficult to absorb than the heme iron in MFP. Consuming heme iron sources alongside non-heme sources will improve the absorption of non-heme iron.
- **Take vitamin C with your source of iron.** Vitamin C increases absorption of both heme and non-heme iron absorption. Four ounces (1/2 cup) of orange juice is enough to increase iron absorption. Other sources of vitamin C include citrus fruit, fresh bell peppers, strawberries, cantaloupe, and fresh broccoli. Consider adding bell peppers to bean salad or eating fortified cereal with berries.
- **Avoid drinking coffee, tea, or red wines with your meals or iron supplements.** Instead, enjoy these beverages between meals. These beverages contain tannins, polyphenols, and phytates which decrease the absorption of iron.
- **Avoid eating** high-fiber foods or taking a calcium supplement during the same meal as an iron source or with iron supplements. Fiber and calcium can decrease iron absorption.
- **Choose a multivitamin that contains iron.** Be sure to read the label or check with your pharmacist, doctor, or Registered Dietitian about which type and amount of vitamin supplement is best for you.
- **Do not take iron supplements unless recommended by your doctor.** Too much iron can lead to health problems.
- **Addition information about iron can be found at:**
 - Medline Plus:
<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/002422.htm> Vegetarian Resource Group: <http://www.vrg.org/nutrition/iron.htm>