

Facts on Iron

Iron is a mineral which is needed by the body to make red blood cells. Red blood cells carry oxygen around the body.

Anaemia occurs when the level of your red blood cells is too low. This means that your body has less oxygen. This can make you feel tired, listless, dizzy and sometimes breathless. Iron is contained in some foods. If you do not eat enough foods with iron, you may develop anaemia.

Should everyone eat more iron-containing foods?

Iron is important for everyone but especially for infants, young children and women who are of child bearing age. Iron is essential for a child's growth and a lack of iron can cause loss of appetite, slow growth, delayed development and more frequent infections.

Those at particular risk of developing anaemia are:

- Teenage girls
- Women who are pregnant or breastfeeding
- Women in their 20s, 30s and 40s
- Children under 5
- People who don't eat meat
- Elderly people

If you feel tired, breathless or dizzy, talk to your GP and get your iron levels checked.

Which foods provide iron?

The best sources of iron are foods from animal sources:

Foods very high in iron:

- Liver *
- Liver pâté *
- Kidney
- Black Pudding
- Heart

*Pregnant women and women planning to become pregnant should **not** eat liver or liver products.

Foods high in iron:

- Red meat such as beef, lamb, pork, ham
- Fish such as sardines, mackerel, tuna, salmon
- Tongue
- Corned beef

Good sources of iron from non-meat foods:

- Fortified breakfast cereals Bran Flakes, Ready Brek, Special K, All Bran, Start, Sultana Bran, Weetabix, Grape-Nuts
- Beans and pulses Lentils, chick peas, soya beans, kidney beans, baked beans, butter beans, dahl
- Dark green leafy vegetables Spinach, spring greens, cabbage, broccoli, leeks, brussel sprouts, kale, cauliflower, okra.
- Dried Fruit Figs, apricots, raisins, sultanas, currants and prunes.
- Nuts and seeds Brazil, cashew, almonds, peanuts, hazelnuts, pumpkin seeds, sesame seeds.
- Eggs
- Bread , especially wholemeal
- Oatmeal and oatcakes

What else can help?

The iron in non-animal foods is not easily absorbed by the body. Having foods or drinks high in Vitamin C with these foods will help the body absorb iron.

Good sources of vitamin C are:

- Fruits Oranges, strawberries, kiwi, grapefruit, raspberries
- Drinks Fruit juice, tomato juice, vegetable juice, blackcurrant squash
- Vegetables Spinach, broccoli, peppers, sprouts

Tea and coffee contain substances that reduce the absorption of iron from food. Only drink these between meals, and at least one hour after eating.

What if I'm a vegetarian?

If you don't eat meat, maintaining your iron levels can be more difficult. The best way to ensure you get enough iron is to include suitable iron rich foods in your diet every day:

Aim to have at least one portion of each of these daily:

- Fortified breakfast cereal
- Wholemeal bread
- 100-150g (4-6oz) cooked lentils or beans
- Green leafy vegetables like broccoli, spinach or cabbage

What if I'm pregnant?

When you are pregnant the body needs more iron. Eating iron-rich foods from the lists above as often as you can will help you to get enough iron.

DO NOT EAT LIVER OR LIVER PRODUCTS (e.g. pâté) as they are very high in Vitamin A. Having too much vitamin A may harm your baby.

If you are concerned about your diet or have any queries regarding this advice please contact a dietitian at Bedford Hospital on 01234 792171 or via email: Dietetics@bedfordhospital.nhs.uk