**Iron Deficiency**

**What is iron?**

Iron is a mineral found in food that your body needs. It helps carry oxygen to all parts of your body.

**How much iron do I need in my diet?**

The amount of iron you need depends on your age, gender and life stage.

Age Amount needed each day

Males 14 to 18 years 11mg

Males 19 years and over 8mg

Females 14 to 18 years 15 mg

Females 19 to 50 years 18 mg

Adults 51 years and over 8 mg

Pregnancy 27 mg

Breastfeeding 9 mg

**What foods have iron?**

You get iron from a number of foods. There are 2 types of iron in our diet: heme and non-heme iron.

* Heme iron is found in animal products such as red meat, fish and poultry.
* Non-heme iron is found in plant products such as grains, nuts, beans, legumes, veges and fruit.

Iron from animal products is better absorbed than iron from plant products.

If you do not eat any animal products, you will need to eat twice as much non-heme iron.

**How can I increase absorption of iron?**

The amount of absorption of non-heme iron can be increased or decreased by other foods in the diet. Here are some tips to help your body absorb the iron from food:

• Combine heme-iron-rich foods with non-heme-iron rich foods when possible.

• Include a source of vitamin C with your meals. Vitamin C helps iron absorption. Some sources of vitamin C include:

Broccoli, grapefruit, potatoes, green/red peppers, strawberries, peas, cabbage, cantaloupe, tomatoes, oranges orange juice, tomato juice, brussel sprouts

• Tea and coffee contain compounds that can decrease iron absorption. Have tea and coffee at least one hour before or after your iron-rich meal.

Include at least one iron-rich food and a food that increases iron absorption at most meals and snacks.

**Ways to add more iron to your diet …**

Dried peas / beans / lentils: Add to soups, salads, and casseroles.

Cream of Wheat: Enjoy it for breakfast or as a bedtime snack.

Prune and tomato juice: Good to drink or use in cooking or baking.

Wheat germ: Sprinkle over cereals. Add to muffins, breads, and casseroles.

Granola: Make your own with whole grain and fortified cereals, dried fruits, seeds and nuts.

Dried fruit: Add to cereals, breads, cookies and desserts.

Eggs: Use as a main dish. Enjoy hard boiled as a snack or added to salads.

**Symptoms of iron deficiency anemia:**

If your iron level is low, your blood carries less oxygen to the cells. This may make you feel weak, tired and look pale. However, you may also have no symptoms. Symptoms include:

* Paleness
* Feeling tired
* Unusual shortness of breath during exercise
* Unusual food cravings (known as pica)
* Fast heartbeat
* Cold hands and feet
* Brittle nails or hair loss
* Headaches
* Dizziness or lightheadedness
* Menstrual irregularities
* Depression / Anxiety / Irritability
* Hair loss
* Tinnitus (ringing in the ears)

**What causes low iron?**

• low intake of iron rich foods • donating blood or bone marrow

• surgery • pregnancy

• large blood loss through menstruation • other health conditions

**Iron deficiency anemia and supplementation**

If you have iron deficiency anemia, you will need to take iron supplements and follow a high iron diet to rebuild your body’s iron stores.

Take iron supplements only when prescribed by your doctor. Iron pills can cause stomach upset, heartburn and constipation. Be sure to tell your doctor about any discomfort you notice. The tips below may help reduce discomfort.

**Tips on taking iron pills**

* To increase the absorption, take your iron supplement on an empty stomach with 8 ounces of liquid. However, if the iron upsets your stomach, take it after a meal.
* Start slowly. Try taking 1 pill a day for 3 to 5 days, then 2 pills a day until you aren't bothered by that amount. Increase the number of pills until you're taking the amount your doctor recommended.
* Increase the fiber in your diet if you have constipation. This is worth trying, even though fiber may get in the way of how well your body can absorb iron. You'll still be able to absorb some iron, and it's better than not taking any iron if you need it.
* Don't take iron pills at bedtime if they upset your stomach.
* If one type of iron pill causes problems, talk to your doctor about trying a different formula or brand.