

Iron Facts

Did you know?

- Iron helps your cells “breathe” and is the key to strong blood
- The body stores iron in the liver, spleen and bone marrow
- The best way to meet your iron needs is to eat a variety of foods from the MyPyramid
- Iron in foods occurs in two forms: heme and nonheme. Heme iron (the most readily absorbed form) is found in meats, poultry and fish.
- Part of hemoglobin is in the blood and in the muscles
- “Red” meats are higher in iron than “white” meats
- A rich source of iron contains 20 percent of the DV or more
- The DV for iron is 18 mg per day for adults and children over 4 years of age.
- Where do women get iron:
 - Grain products (includes breads and other baked products, pasta, rice and other cereals) – 43%
 - Meat, poultry, fish – 26%
 - Fruits, vegetables – 15%
 - Fats, sweets, beverages – 7%
 - Eggs, legumes, nuts, seeds – 7%
 - Milk, milk products – 3%

Food Sources

- Iron is usually associated with the more colorful foods, red meats, dark green vegetables and the browns of whole grains
- Iron is not concentrated in many foods outside of liver and organ meats

Food Sources:

- Beef
- Liver: beef, calf, pork, chicken, turkey
- Shellfish
- Dry beans, peas, lentils
- Green leafy vegetables
- Raisins
- Dried apricots
- Iron-fortified breads and cereals

- Fortified cereals and breads also are good sources of iron
- Your body absorbs iron better when the iron is from plant sources or combined with foods rich in vitamin C
- Cooking foods in cast iron pots and pans also will add iron to your diet
- Tofu, breast milk and infant formulas are good sources of iron
- The darker the sugar the higher its iron content
- Black strap molasses is a fairly good source of iron

Iron Overload

- Too much iron can be toxic to the body
- It can cause nausea, vomiting, diarrhea or constipation
- Too much iron in the body can damage the liver

- You should not get more than 45 mg of iron per day from food and supplements
- If a child accidentally swallows an overdose of iron pills, it can harm or even kill them. In fact, despite child-resistant packaging iron is the leading cause of poisoning deaths in children under six
- The iron in meat, poultry and fish is absorbed and utilized more readily than iron in other foods
- The presence of vitamin C (ascorbic acid) in a meal also increases iron absorption
- Indication of poor iron status is iron deficiency anemia
- Red blood cells are reduced when iron is low
- Many doctors recommend feeding fortified milk formula, breakfast cereal, or giving iron supplement to infants and toddlers, because it is especially difficult to meet their iron needs

Cooking and Iron

- Iron is lost in cooking some foods even under the best conditions
- To retain iron:
 - Cook foods in a minimal amount of water
 - Cook for the shortest possible time
- Pasta, white rice and most breads made from refined flours are enriched with iron because it is one of the nutrients lost in processing
- Enriched products or products made from enriched flour are labeled. For example, Farina (a quick cooking wheat cereal good. Enriched farina is a good source of B vitamins, carbohydrates for energy, iron for healthy red blood cells, and protein for growth and repair of the body). Farina can be used as a hot cereal. Other uses: coating for meat, fish or chicken and substitute for cornmeal in any recipe
- Fortified ready-to-eat cereals usually contain at least 25 percent of the Daily Value of iron

Sources: University of Florida Extension, Virginia Cooperative Extension, Nebraska Cooperative Extension and Cooperative Extension Service University of Kentucky College of Agriculture
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