



Iron in Foods

Why do I need iron?

Iron is a mineral that your body uses to make hemoglobin (pronounced “hee-muh-glow-bin”). Hemoglobin is found in your red blood cells and helps carry oxygen to all parts of your body. Babies and children need iron for healthy growth and development, including brain development.

The amount of iron you need each day depends on your age, sex, whether you are pregnant or breastfeeding, and what food sources of iron you eat.

What foods contain iron?

Iron is found naturally in many foods such as:

- Meat, poultry and fish
- Eggs
- Beans, peas, lentils, tofu
- Some vegetables such as spinach and beets
- Whole grains such as quinoa, whole oats and whole grain bread
- Nuts, seeds and some dried fruit like raisins

Some foods have iron added to them. In Canada, iron must be added to certain foods like white flour and meat substitutes. Other foods such as breakfast cereal, infant cereal and pasta may also have added iron. Check the ingredient list and nutrition facts table to see if iron has been added and how much.

What are the different forms of iron?

There are 2 types of iron found in foods:

- *Heme* iron is found in meat, fish and poultry, and is easily absorbed by your body
- *Non-heme* iron is found in eggs and plant-based foods such as beans, lentils, nuts and seeds, whole grains and some vegetables. It is also found in foods with added iron. This

type of iron is not absorbed as well by your body

You can absorb more non-heme iron from foods by eating them at the same time as foods with heme iron or foods high in vitamin C. Foods high in vitamin C include:

- Red, yellow and green peppers
- Broccoli, brussels sprouts, snow peas
- Papaya, kiwi fruit, strawberries
- Oranges, grapefruit

How much iron is in food?

You can use the food sources table below to find out how much iron a food contains. You can also use the Canadian Nutrient File (see For More Information).

For foods that have a label, check the nutrition facts table. The percent daily value (%DV) on the nutrition facts table tells you if a food has “a little” or “a lot” of iron. “A little” is 5% DV or less and ‘a lot’ is 15% DV or more. Some labels will also list the amount of iron in milligrams.

For More Information

- [HealthLinkBC File #68c Iron and Your Health](#)
- Iron content of specific foods: [Canadian Nutrient File](#)

For more nutrition information, call **8-1-1** to speak with a registered dietitian.

Food Sources of Iron

Foods with heme iron	Serving	Iron (mg)
Liver (pork, chicken, or beef)*	75 g (2 ½ oz)	4.6 to 13.4
Oysters** or mussels	75 g (2 ½ oz)	5.0 to 6.3
Lamb or beef	75 g (2 ½ oz)	1.5 to 2.4
Clams	75 g (2 ½ oz)	2.1
Sardines, canned	75 g (2 ½ oz)	2.0
Tuna, herring, trout, or mackerel	75 g (2 ½ oz)	1.2
Chicken or pork	75 g (2 ½ oz)	0.9
Salmon or turkey	75 g (2 ½ oz)	0.5
Foods with non-heme iron	Serving	Iron (mg)
Infant cereal with added iron	28 g (5 tbsp)	7.0
Soybeans, cooked	175 mL (¾ cup)	6.5
Beans or lentils	175 mL (¾ cup)	3.3 to 4.9
Pumpkin seeds/kernels, roasted	60 mL (¼ cup)	4.7
Cold cereal with added iron	30 g	4.5
Blackstrap molasses	15 mL (1 tbsp)	3.6
Hot cereal with added iron	175 mL (¾ cup)	3.4
Spinach, cooked	125 mL (½ cup)	3.4
Meatless meatballs	150 g	3.2
Tofu, firm or extra firm, or edamame, cooked	150 g (¾ cup)	2.4
Tahini (sesame seed butter)	30 mL (2 tbsp)	2.3
Chickpeas	175 mL (¾ cup)	2.2
Swiss chard or beet greens, cooked	125 mL (½ cup)	1.5 to 2.1
Potato, baked with skin	1 medium	1.9
Bagel	½ bagel	1.9
Seaweed, agar (dried)	8 g (½ cup)	1.7
Prune puree	60 mL (¼ cup)	1.7
Quinoa, cooked	125 mL (½ cup)	1.5
Eggs	2	1.4
Quick or large flake oats, prepared	175 mL (¾ cup)	1.4
Almonds, walnuts, or pecans	60 mL (¼ cup)	0.8 to 1.3
Green peas, cooked	125 mL (½ cup)	1.3
White bread	35 g (1 slice)	1.3
Egg noodles with added iron	125 mL (½ cup)	1.2
Sunflower seeds/ kernels, dry roasted	60 mL (¼ cup)	1.2
Tomato sauce, canned	125 mL (½ cup)	1.2
Sauerkraut	125 mL (½ cup)	1.1
Soy beverage	250 mL (1 cup)	1.1
Spinach, raw	250 mL (1 cup)	0.9
Dried apricots or raisins	60 mL (¼ cup)	0.7 to 0.9
Whole wheat bread	35 g (1 slice)	0.9
Whole wheat pasta, cooked	125 mL (½ cup)	0.8
Asparagus or sliced beets, cooked	6 spears	0.7 to 0.8

g = gram, mg = milligram, mL = milliliter, tbsp = tablespoon

Source: Canadian Nutrient File

*If you are pregnant, limit liver and liver products to 75g (2 ½ ounces) per week. Liver is high in vitamin A. Too much vitamin A may cause birth defects.

**Pacific oysters from British Columbia tend to be higher in cadmium. Limit intake to 12 per month for adults and 1.5 per month for children.