

Improving your dietary iron intake

This leaflet provides advice on how to increase the amount of iron in your diet. If you have any further questions, please contact the Nutrition and Dietetics Department (contact details are at the end of this leaflet).

Why do I need iron?

Iron is important for good health and helps to make haemoglobin, the protein in blood which carries oxygen around the blood. The body can not make its own iron, which means we need to get all our iron from the food we eat. A low intake of iron can cause anaemia, which may cause tiredness, weakness or breathlessness. Therefore, it is important to regularly eat iron-rich foods to help prevent low iron levels.

How much iron do I need in my diet?

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

One iron star ☆ equals 1mg of iron.

Age (years)	Males	Females	Iron stars☆
15-18	11.3mg	14.8mg	11 (males) 15 (females)
19-50	8.7mg	14.8mg	9 (males) 15 (females)
50+	8.7mg	8.7mg	9

Pregnant or breastfeeding women do not need to increase their iron intake as they should have adequate iron stores to cope with the demands made by pregnancy. This is due to the lack of menstruation, increased absorption via the gut and body stores of iron becoming more available.

How can I improve my iron intake?

Iron is found in animal and non-animal sources, however iron from animal sources is better absorbed. Vitamin C can help improve the absorption of iron when included with an iron-containing meal.

Foods which are good sources of vitamin C include:

- fruit, especially citrus fruit, such as oranges, pineapple, grapefruit
- fruit juices (limit to one small glass per day) and squash drinks with added vitamin C
- salad vegetables, such as tomatoes and peppers
- lightly cooked vegetables, such as peas, carrots, broccoli, spinach, cauliflower
- potatoes.

Coffee and tea contain tannins which can reduce the amount of iron you absorb from food, so avoid drinking these at meal times. Raw wheat bran also inhibits iron absorption and should be avoided.

Animal sources of iron:

- Lean beef, pork, lamb
- Liver and kidney, liver sausage (pregnant women should avoid liver and liver sausage because of their high vitamin A content)
- Corned beef
- Chicken and turkey, especially the dark meat like drumsticks
- Tuna, sardines, mackerel, pilchards and salmon
- Fish paste, meat paste
- Well-cooked eggs (avoid raw or lightly cooked eggs).

Non-animal sources of iron:

- Red kidney beans, haricot, pinto, black-eye beans, boiled or canned
- Dahl, lentils, chickpeas, baked beans and peas
- Nuts and peanut butter
- Breakfast cereals with added iron, such as cornflakes, Rice Krispies, Weetabix, Ready brek
- Dried fruit, such as apricots, figs, prunes, raisins and sultanas
- Bread, chapatti, pitta bread made with wholemeal flour
- Cauliflower, spring greens, broccoli, canned mixed vegetables
- Tofu.

Example meal plan:

Breakfast	Cereal and milk (for example Weetabix/porridge) Wholemeal toast Fruit juice or a portion of fruit
Snack	Baked beans on toast Sardines on toast Sandwiches – wholemeal bread with peanut butter, corned beef, or egg and tomato salad Portion of fruit
Main meal	Lentil stew, nut roast or bean stew Potatoes – jacket/boiled Green vegetables or salad
Puddings	Stewed apricots Bread and butter pudding

The tables below and on page 4 show how much iron is found in different foods.

Food	Average portion	Iron (mg)	Stars
Meat, fish and eggs – these sources are the best absorbed by the body			
Liver*	1 thick slice (40g)	3.0	☆☆☆
Beef steaks	1 medium steak (150g)	3.5	☆☆☆½
Sausage	2 x medium	1.6	☆ ½
Corned beef	1 thick slice (50g)	1.2	☆
Minced beef (stewed)	4 tablespoon cooked (125g)	3.4	☆☆☆½
Lean roast beef	1 thick slice (50g)	1.0	☆
Roast lamb	2 thick slices (100g)	1.1	☆
Pork chop	1 average chop (120g)	0.85	☆
Dark roast turkey/chicken	2 slices (60g)	0.8	☆
Sardines or pilchards canned in oil	Average sandwich filling (50g)	1.25	☆
Tuna	½ tin (100g)	1.0	☆

*Note: pregnant women should avoid liver and liver sausage because of their high vitamin A content

Lentils, beans, nuts and seeds – these sources are better absorbed with vitamin C-containing foods			
Chickpeas (canned)	4 tablespoons cooked (100g)	2.1	☆☆
Lentils – green & brown	½ cup cooked (75g)	2.5	☆☆ ½
Lentils – red	½ cup cooked (75g)	1.8	☆☆
Baked beans	3 tablespoons or ½ small tin (120g)	1.7	☆☆
Beans – butter beans red kidney	½ cup cooked (75g)	1.3	☆ ½
	3 tablespoons (100g)	2.6	☆☆ ½
Hummus	2 tablespoons (50g)	1.2	☆
Eggs	1 egg (60g)	1.3	☆ ½
Tofu (fried)	50g (a fifth of the packet)	1.8	☆☆
Nuts – almonds cashews	20g	0.8	☆
	25g	1.5	☆ ½
Sesame seeds	1 tablespoon (12g)	1.2	☆
Sunflower seeds	¼ cup (30g)	1.9	☆☆

Breakfast cereals and breads – these sources are better absorbed with vitamin C containing foods			
Ready brek (dry)	1 small portion (20g)	6.0	☆☆☆☆☆☆
Branflakes	4 tablespoons (25g)	4.6	☆☆☆☆ ½
Special K	4 tablespoons (30g)	3.5	☆☆☆ ½
Weetabix	2 biscuits (40g)	3.0	☆☆☆
Rice Krispies	4 tablespoons (30g)	2.3	☆☆ ½
Cornflakes	6 tablespoons (45g)	2.3	☆☆
Poppadoms	2 x poppodoms (22g)	2.4	☆☆ ½
Naan	1 medium (170g)	2.2	☆☆ ½
White bread	2 medium slices (70g)	1.2	☆
Wholemeal bread	2 medium slices (70g)	2	☆☆

Fruit and vegetables			
Apricots (dried)	8 apricots (65g)	2.1	☆☆
Fig (dried)	4 figs (80g)	3.4	☆☆☆ ½
Raisins	1 tablespoon (35g)	1.1	☆
Sultanas	1 tablespoon (35g)	0.7	½
Blackcurrants (tinned)	60g	2.8	☆☆☆
Spinach	3 tablespoons boiled (120g)	1.9	☆☆
Avocado pear	½ pear (130g)	1.4	☆ ½
Peas	2½ tablespoons boiled (75g)	1.2	☆
Broccoli	2 spears boiled (95g)	0.5	½
Brussel sprouts	9 sprouts (90g)	0.5	½
Other			
Chocolate – milk plain	1 average bar (50g)	0.8	☆
	1 average bar (50g)	1.2	☆
Ovaltine made with water	4 teaspoons (25g serving)	3.6	☆☆☆½
Milo (chocolate malt)	4 teaspoons (20g serving)	6.0	☆☆☆☆☆☆

Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the dietitians on **020 7188 2010** (Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm).

For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/leaflets

Pharmacy Medicines Helpline

If you have any questions or concerns about your medicines, please speak to the staff caring for you or call our helpline.

t: 020 7188 8748 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

To make comments or raise concerns about the Trust's services, please contact PALS. Ask a member of staff to direct you to the PALS office or:

t: 020 7188 8801 at St Thomas' **t:** 020 7188 8803 at Guy's **e:** pals@gstt.nhs.uk

Language Support Services

If you need an interpreter or information about your care in a different language or format, please get in touch using the following contact details.

t: 020 7188 8815 **fax:** 020 7188 5953

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t: 111

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