

Increasing Dietary Iron in Pregnancy

May 2023

Iron in pregnancy

In pregnancy, your daily need for iron almost doubles, increasing from 18mg per day before you were pregnant, to 27mg per day. Not only is iron required to support your changing body, but your baby's growth and development depend on it. Iron is also vital to make red blood cells. Red blood cells have the important job of carrying oxygen around your body and your baby's body. Your body's demand for iron continues to rise throughout pregnancy and peaks during the last few months before birth.

Your pregnant body usually increases the uptake of iron from food into your gut, but for some women, increasing enough iron in their diet can be difficult. This factsheet discusses iron-rich foods and will help you learn how to increase your dietary iron intake.

What types of food contain iron?

There are two types of iron in our diet: haem iron and non-haem iron.

Haem iron is in animal protein such as red meat, chicken and fish.



Non-haem iron is in plant foods like fruit and vegetables, pulses (chickpeas and lentils), nuts and cereals.

Eggs have both haem and non-haem iron. Most iron is found in the yolk.



How can I increase iron-rich foods in my diet?

Lean red meat provides the best source, the redder the meat the higher the iron content. This meat is absorbed 2 to 3 times more readily than plant-based foods. Not everyone eats meat so there are many ways you can help release iron from these other foods, such as the plant-based foods as they are still a good source of iron.

Ways to boost iron in your diet

- 1. Eat meat**, since this type of iron is easily absorbed there is no need for additional foods to improve iron absorption.
- 2. Combine vegetables with meat** to enhance the release of iron from the vegetables.
- 3. Cook vegetables** to improve the amount of available iron.
- 3. Eat fermented foods** such as tempeh and miso. Fermentation helps preserve the availability of iron that our bodies can use.
- 4. Eat orange-coloured foods** that contain beta-carotene and vitamin A such as carrots, sweet potatoes, squash, red capsicums, apricots and peaches.
- 5. Eat dark leafy vegetables** like spinach and kale.
- 6. Eat or drink vitamin C-rich foods** with your meals for maximum absorption of iron.

Ascorbic acid (vitamin-C-rich foods) increase the availability of iron for your body. This is especially important if you mainly eat plant-based foods. Vitamin-C-rich foods include citrus fruit, tomatoes, capsicums, berries, broccoli, cauliflower, Brussels sprouts, and cabbage.

What to avoid



- Limit foods containing bran (phytates), and tea, coffee, and red wine (tannins) during or directly after a meal as they prevent the absorption of iron.
- Avoid over-use of antacids, as stomach acid aids the absorption of iron.
- Avoid foods high in calcium with meals, such as milk and cheese, as these can reduce absorption of iron.
- Check with your doctor or midwife about any possible dietary interactions with your medications or herbal supplements that could impair iron absorption.

This does not mean that you should remove the above foods from your diet. Either pair them with foods high in vitamin C to boost iron absorption in a meal or eat them between meals.

Where to find other support

If you would like further advice, you can contact the **NSW Health Get Healthy in Pregnancy (GHIP)** service. This free service provides information and advice about your diet and maintaining a healthy lifestyle. You can be referred by your doctor or midwife or you can contact them yourself either by phone at 1300 806 258 or online.

<https://www.gethealthynsw.com.au/program/get-healthy-in-pregnancy>

You can also be referred to a **dietitian** at the Royal Hospital for Women. Please ask your doctor or midwife about this.

Other useful resources

www.eatforhealth.gov.au

www.dietitiansaustralia.org.au

<https://www.gesa.org.au/education/patient-resources/>

Animal-based iron sources (haem iron)

Food	Iron content (per 100mg)
Beef	3.5mg
Kangaroo	3.2mg
Lamb	2.5mg
Salmon	1.28mg
Tinned tuna	1.07mg
Pork	0.8mg
Chicken	0.4mg
Snapper	0.3mg

Plant-based iron sources (non-haem iron)

Food	Serving size	Iron content
Lentils	100g	3.3mg
Pumpkin seeds	28g	3.2mg
Kidney beans	1 cup	3.1mg
Tofu	100g	2.96mg
Chickpeas	100g	2.8mg
Cooked wholemeal pasta	140g (1 cup)	2.3mg
Eggs	2 (120g)	2.0mg
Cashew nuts	30g (20 nuts)	1.5mg
Raw spinach	1 cup	1.2mg
Almonds	30g	1.1mg
Dried apricots	30g (5 dried apricots)	0.93mg
Broccoli	1 cup	0.86mg
Cooked brown rice	140g (1 cup)	0.7mg
Wholegrain bread	1 slice	0.4mg
Weetbix TM *	30g	4.2mg
All Bran TM *	30g	3.2mg
Milo*	2 heaped teaspoons	2.2mg
Rolled oats*	30g	1.1mg

**Best iron absorption without milk
Table Ref. Nutrition Australia (2021), NEMO, QLD Health (2020), and the Royal Women's Hospital (2021).*

Endorsed 24/5/23. Reviewed by consumers in development stage. Should you wish to discuss any aspect of this information please send an email RHWfeedback@health.nsw.gov.au.