

November 4, 2020 / Nutrition

How to Add Foods That Are High in Iron to Your Diet

Plus, simple ways to pump up breakfast, lunch and dinner

Are you getting enough iron daily? The chances are that most of us probably aren't. Our bodies need iron to grow and develop. Iron can also help prevent anemia and protect your body from infection. If you haven't been chowing down on iron-rich foods, we're going to give you some easy ways to incorporate this nutritional powerhouse into your diet.

Foods that are high in iron by type

To get a better idea of how you can work more iron into your diet, here is a handy list of iron-rich foods.

Iron-rich legumes

- **Dried or canned peas and beans (kidney, garbanzo, cannellini, soybeans, etc.).**
- **Lentils.**
- **Peas.**
- **Tofu.**
- **Tempeh (fermented soybeans).**

Iron-rich bread and cereal

- **Enriched white bread.**
- **Enriched pasta.**
- **Wheat products.**

- **Bran cereals.**
- **Cornmeal.**
- **Oat cereals.**
- **Cream of Wheat.**
- **Rye bread.**
- **Enriched rice.**
- **Whole wheat bread.**

Iron-rich fruit

- **Figs.**
- **Dates.**
- **Raisins.**
- **Prunes and prune juice.**

Iron-rich protein sources

- **Beef.**
- **Chicken.**
- **Clams.**
- **Eggs.**
- **Lamb.**
- **Ham.**
- **Turkey.**
- **Veal.**
- **Pork.**
- **Liver.**
- **Shrimp.**
- **Tuna.**
- **Sardines.**
- **Haddock.**
- **Mackerel.**

- **Oysters.**
- **Scallops.**

Iron-rich vegetables

- **Broccoli.**
- **String beans.**
- **Dark leafy greens – Dandelion, collard, kale, spinach.**
- **Potatoes.**
- **Cabbage, Brussels sprouts.**
- **Tomato paste and other products.**

Other foods that are high in iron

- **Blackstrap molasses.**
- **Pistachios.**
- **Pumpkin seeds.**
- **Sesame seeds.**
- **Flax seeds.**
- **Almonds.**
- **Cashews.**
- **Pine nuts.**
- **Macadamia nuts.**
- **Hemp seeds.**

Why you need iron in your diet

“Iron is a vital component of hemoglobin, which makes it an important mineral that our bodies need in order to carry oxygen so that our cells can produce energy,” says registered dietitian Julia Zumpano, RD, LD. “If we don’t have enough iron, we will not have enough red blood cells to transport oxygen. This leads to extreme fatigue and lightheadedness,” Zumpano adds.

Iron is also essential for brain development and growth, and the

production of many other cells and hormones in the body.

“Without adequate iron stores, individuals can develop a condition called iron-deficiency anemia — the most common nutritional deficiency worldwide. It’s associated with symptoms like fatigue, weakness, trouble maintaining body heat, pale skin, dizziness, headache, and an inflamed tongue,” says Zumpano.

How much iron do adults need daily?

According to Zumpano, the daily recommended amount of iron for adults ages 19-50 is:

- **18 milligrams a day for women.**
- **27 milligrams a day for pregnant women.**
- **9 milligrams a day for lactating women.**
- **8 milligrams a day for men.**

In general, women tend to need more iron to make up for what is lost during menstrual cycles. Women who are 51 and older should aim for 8 milligrams of iron daily.

How much iron do kids need?

For children, the recommended amount of iron can vary based on age.

Birth to 6 months	0.27 milligrams
7-12 months	11 milligrams
1-3 years	7 milligrams
4-8 years	10 milligrams
9-13 years	8 milligrams
14-18 years	11 milligrams for males 15 milligrams for females

While these are general guidelines, Zumpano recommends that you get a proper diagnosis and a personalized recommendation from your doctor.

Types of iron

There are two main types of iron — heme and non-heme iron.

Zumpano explains.

Heme iron

“Heme is better absorbed by the body and is commonly found in liver, meat, poultry and seafood.”

Non-heme iron

“Non-heme iron is commonly found in legumes (beans), nuts, seeds, and certain vegetables like spinach and potatoes.”

You can also get iron through fortified sources such as tofu, grains, bread and cereal.

Is it better to get iron from food or a supplement?

The good news is that most people can get a sufficient amount of iron in their diets. Zumpano says this is mainly due to the consumption of animal products.

“Most people can get the iron they need from the food they eat. This is in part due to the fact that the main source of iron in the typical American diet is from animal products. The average American eats significantly more than the daily allowance.”

If you don't eat meat or animal products, Zumpano suggests that you eat more leafy greens, legumes (beans), whole grains, mushrooms and tofu, along with vitamin C-rich foods like citrus fruits, strawberries, tomatoes and red peppers. Eating a source of iron with a source of vitamin C will help your body absorb iron even better.

“The key is that we should always get our iron from food unless our physician recommends otherwise. For some, a supplement may be necessary, but you shouldn't start taking one without discussing it

with your physician first,” says Zumpano.

How to make sure you're absorbing enough iron

Wondering what helps with iron absorption? Here are some helpful tips to remember from Zumpano:

- **Consume foods that are rich in iron, specifically non-heme iron, with a source of vitamin C.** Foods with vitamin A and beta-carotene help absorption as well. These foods include carrots, sweet potatoes, spinach, kale, squash, red peppers, cantaloupe, apricots, oranges and peaches.
- **Limit the amount of calcium that you consume** with foods that are rich in iron as calcium can block iron absorption.
- **Eat a quality diet** that's filled with healthy sources of nutrients.
- **If you've been trying to get iron in pill form, check to see if you're taking a calcium supplement or a multivitamin that's high in calcium.** Talk to your doctor to make sure that a supplement won't be harder for your body to absorb.

Iron recommendations for plant-based diets

If you follow a vegetarian or vegan diet, it's important to consume vitamin-c rich foods with iron sources and consume them in greater quantities. Zumpano also suggests being cautious with calcium-rich foods in the process because they can decrease absorption.

Iron-packed meal ideas

You can incorporate foods that are rich in iron into breakfast, lunch, dinner and snacks. Here are some simple meal ideas to get you started.

Breakfast

Breakfast Fried Rice with Scrambled Eggs

This recipe calls for quite a few sources of iron — cashews, eggs, sesame seeds and peas. You can even get creative and toss in more iron-rich veggies and a protein source for even more flavor.

Lunch

Zesty Bean Salad

Kidney beans are at the center of this hearty salad, but you can use a combo of your favorite beans if you want. Enjoy this dish as-is or serve it over spinach or mixed greens.

Dinner

Charcuterie Dinner Board

Dinner doesn't always have to be complicated. Throw some meats, dried fruits, veggies, cheese, nuts and more on a charcuterie board and dig in!

Snack

Toasted Quinoa and Almond Date Balls

This treat is delicious and naturally delicious. It's also made with fruits, seeds, nuts and grains that are wonderful sources of iron.