

HEALTHY BEGINNINGS

IRON AND YOUR CHILD

Iron is an important mineral that helps make red blood cells, carries oxygen to muscles and other cells, and helps with brain development.

If iron-rich foods are not offered regularly, it can lead to iron deficiency, which can affect growth, concentration and learning.

Signs of iron deficiency include:

- Irritability (cranky) or headaches
- Feeling tired or weak
- Shortness of breath
- Dizziness or light-headedness
- Slow weight gain
- Pale skin
- Cold hands and feet
- Low appetite

THE TWO TYPES OF IRON

Heme iron is found in animal products like meat, poultry and fish. It is the easiest form of iron for your body to absorb.

Non-heme iron is found in vegetables, enriched or fortified whole grains and plant-based proteins like legumes, dried fruit and nuts. It is not as well absorbed by the body.

VEGETARIANS NEED MORE IRON

Since the iron in vegetarian diets (depending on what type of vegetarian) is mostly or all non-

heme iron, vegetarians need almost twice the iron as non-vegetarians.

BABIES AND IRON

Babies have iron stores that last about six months. Once your baby starts solid foods, here is how to help them get enough iron:

- Introduce iron-rich foods as their first food (e.g. iron-fortified infant cereals, meat or plant-based proteins like beans or lentils)
- Continue to offer iron-rich foods at least twice daily. Once they are 12 months, offer iron-rich foods at all meals
- Wait until at least 9 months to offer cow's milk as their main milk since it has no iron

HELPING THE BODY ABSORB IRON BETTER

Vitamin C helps absorb non-heme iron so serve foods with vitamin C (fruit and/or vegetables) with meals and snacks

Heme iron also helps absorb non-heme iron so include meat, poultry or fish with vegetables, legumes or whole grains

READING FOOD LABELS

Look for the percent daily value (% DV) on the Nutrition Facts table to compare or know if the product or food is:

PUBLIC HEALTH

1-877-464-9675
TTY 1-866-512-6228
york.ca/feedingkids

- **A source of iron** - contains at least 5% DV
- **A good source of iron** - contains at least 15% DV per serving
- **An excellent source of iron** - contains at least 25% DV per serving

WHAT ABOUT IRON SUPPLEMENTS?

Iron supplements are rarely needed. If iron-rich foods are not being eaten, talk to a health care provider. If a supplement is needed, follow the instructions and store it in a safe place.

FOODS THAT ARE A SOURCE OF IRON

* Caution as these foods are a choking hazard for children under four years of age

Protein foods (heme iron)

- Beef, veal and lamb
- Certain fish (bass, herring, light canned tuna, Pacific mackerel, sardines, Rainbow trout), with bones removed
- Chicken and dark-meat turkey
- Ham

Protein foods (non-heme iron)

- Beans (white, red, lima, baked, navy)
- Certain nuts* (almonds, cashews, hazelnuts, pistachios)
- Certain seeds* (hulled pumpkin seeds, sesame seeds, hulled sunflower seeds)
- Chickpeas and hummus
- Edamame (young, green soybeans)
- Eggs
- Lentils and black-eyed peas
- Tahini (sesame butter)
- Tofu and tempeh

Whole grains (non-heme iron)

- Certain fortified breakfast and infant cereals
- Oatmeal (instant, quick oats)
- Fortified pasta (spaghetti, macaroni)
- Wheat germ
- Bread, pita or naan

Vegetables and fruit (non-heme iron)

- Beets and beet greens
- Canned pumpkin
- Dried longan* (Asian dried fruit)
- Peas (green, snow)
- Tomato sauce
- Spinach
- Sweet potatoes

FOODS THAT ARE NOT A SOURCE OF IRON

- Rice - including rice-based traditional foods like congee, even when made with meat
- Milk – drinking too much milk can cause low iron levels. If your child is not breastfeeding, offer 2 cups (500 mL) of milk per day
- Yogurt, cheese and other milk products
- Most vegetables and fruit

IDEAS TO GET MORE IRON

- Offer protein foods at two meals per day
- If your child is vegetarian, offer eggs and/or non-heme protein foods at most meals
- Add beans, chickpeas, and lentils to casseroles, soups, stews and salads
- Add infant cereal, wheat germ and ground nuts or seeds to muffin, pancake, burger or meatloaf recipes
- Prepare tomato or meat sauces instead of white or cream sauces
- Make homemade baked sweet potato fries
- If you offer a meat or fish congee, double or triple the meat or fish in the recipe
- Cook using an iron skillet or wok which transfers some iron to the foods
- Search online for recipes using words like “iron rich recipes” or “recipes, kids, iron”

For more information and additional nutrition resources, visit york.ca/feedingkids or unlockfood.ca

To speak to a registered dietitian at no cost, call Telehealth Ontario at 1-866-797-0000.

May be reproduced without permission provided source is acknowledged. 2019.