

Anemia and Iron-Rich Foods

What is iron?

Iron is a mineral in the human body. It is one of the components of hemoglobin, the substance in red blood cells that helps blood carry oxygen throughout the body.

If you do not have enough iron, your body cannot make hemoglobin, and you may develop anemia, a disorder that occurs when there is not enough hemoglobin in the blood. When you develop anemia, you are said to be “anemic.”



What are the symptoms of anemia?

The major symptoms of anemia include the following:

- Feeling tired
- Difficulty breathing
- Dizziness
- Headache
- Feeling cold

What causes anemia?

Low levels of iron is the most common cause of anemia. This is known as iron-deficiency anemia, the most common type of anemia. Factors that can reduce the body's iron levels include:

- Blood loss (caused by ulcers, some cancers, and other conditions; and, in women, during monthly periods)
- An iron-poor diet
- An increase in the body's need for iron (for instance, during pregnancy)

Anyone can develop iron-deficiency anemia, although the following groups have a higher risk:

- women, because of blood loss during monthly periods and childbirth
- people over 65, who are more likely to have diets that are low in iron
- people who are on blood thinners such as aspirin, Plavix®, Coumadin®, or heparin
- people who have kidney failure (especially if they are on dialysis), because they have trouble making red blood cells
- people who have trouble absorbing iron

Can iron-deficiency anemia be treated?

Yes. This type of anemia can be treated and cured. First, your health care provider will determine if the anemia is being caused by a poor diet or a more serious health problem. Then, you can be treated for both the anemia and its cause. Iron-deficiency anemia is treated with iron supplements taken by mouth, or by eating foods that are high in iron.

What foods are high in iron?

The iron in food comes from two sources: animals and plants. Iron from animal sources is known as **heme iron** and is found in various meats and fish. Iron from plants is known as **nonheme iron**, and is found in certain vegetables and in iron-fortified foods such as breakfast cereals. Heme iron is better absorbed by the body than nonheme iron.

The following foods are good sources of heme iron (from animal sources):

- Chicken liver
- Oysters
- Clams
- Beef liver
- Beef (chuck roast, lean ground beef)
- Turkey leg
- Tuna
- Eggs
- Shrimp
- Leg of lamb



The following foods are good sources of non-heme iron (from plants):

- Raisin bran (enriched)
- Instant oatmeal
- Beans (kidney, lima, Navy)
- Tofu
- Lentils
- Molasses
- Spinach
- Whole wheat bread
- Peanut butter
- Brown rice



Try to combine nonheme iron foods with vitamin C (for example, a glass of orange juice) to increase absorption of iron.

Talk to your health care provider to determine how much iron you need every day.

This information is not intended to replace the medical advice of your doctor or health care provider. Please consult your health care provider for advice about a specific medical condition.



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