

# Iron in Foods

## Why iron is important

Iron is a mineral that helps our bodies carry oxygen around in the blood. This gives energy to be active each day.

Iron helps with brain development.

When babies are born, they have enough iron stores for their first six months. After this, they need to start getting iron from food.

## How does iron deficiency happen?

Babies and children may become 'iron deficient' (low in iron) for many reasons; the most common is that they are not eating enough iron-rich foods.

Signs of low iron in children can be being tired for no reason, getting out of breath easily, and losing their appetite.

If you are worried about your child's iron levels, talk to your GP.

## Iron in animal foods

Iron is found in meat. This kind of iron is called 'haem' iron, and is absorbed best by the body.

Good sources of 'haem' iron include:

- red meat
- pork
- chicken
- fish

Eggs also contain iron but it is harder for the body to absorb.

## Iron in plant foods

Iron is also found in plant foods, this is called 'non-haem' iron. 'Non-haem' is harder for the body to absorb. But plant foods are still a good source of iron, especially if your family follows a vegetarian or vegan diet.

Good sources of iron from plants include:

- legumes (beans and lentils)
- tofu
- green leafy vegetables
- infant and breakfast cereal with added iron
- wholemeal bread
- nuts\* and seeds such as almonds, cashews, pinenuts, pumpkin and sunflower seeds.

\* Use nut pastes for children under three years of age. Check your services allergy aware policy before sending nuts to care or school.

## Helping your child get more iron from food

- Offer red meat, pork, fish, chicken, tofu or legumes every day.
- Offer wholemeal bread and breakfast cereals with added iron.
- Include vitamin C rich foods (like citrus fruits, tomatoes, capsicum, broccoli and berries) with meals. This helps the body absorb iron more easily.
- Do not give children tea, this stops iron from being absorbed.

## First food ideas

Include good sources of iron foods among baby's first foods. Change the texture from pureed to mashed, then minced and chopped (finger foods) as your baby gets older.



Pureed meat, chicken, fish  
casserole or savoury meat sauce



Scrambled eggs



Mashed, lentils, baked  
beans or tofu

## Finger foods with good sources of iron

As babies grow and become more independent with their eating, they like to play with food and to feed themselves.



Small meat, chicken, fish, chickpea  
or lentil balls and patties



Egg and vegetable slice or boiled  
eggs cut up



Tofu pieces and vegetables

See Finger Food Recipes handout for recipe ideas.

## Want to know more

Ask your GP or child health nurse.