



Iron

Children have a particularly high iron requirement. From when they are born till the age of one, the amount of iron in their body doubles, and doubles again from 1 – 6 years. It is essential for normal growth and brain development. It makes sense that the requirement for iron is also high again during the adolescent growth spurt. Iron carries oxygen through the blood, and delivers it to muscle tissue including the heart, lungs and skeletal muscle. Iron is also used by the body to help fight infections. Ferritin, the body's reserve of iron, is stored in the liver, spleen and bone marrow.

Food sources of iron

There are two types of iron in food:

Haem iron, which is absorbed readily by the body. This is found in lean meat, chicken and fish.

Non-haem iron which is more difficult for the body to absorb. It is found in leafy vegetables, iron fortified breakfast cereals (including iron fortified rice cereal), eggs, dried fruit and legumes. It is best to combine this form of iron with a vitamin C source (eg. pineapple, orange, rock melon, strawberries, capsicum, or lemon juice) to enhance absorption. In addition, when haem and non-haem iron foods are eaten together, this also enhances iron uptake. Wheat bran, as well as tea and coffee, can reduce the absorption of iron. So, if teenagers are drinking tea or coffee, advise them not to drink it when eating iron-rich foods.

Iron requirements

Daily Iron Requirements

Boys and Girls	(mg)
7-12 months	9.0
1-3 years	6 – 8
4-7 years	6 – 8
8-11 years	6 – 8
12-15 years	10 – 13
16-18 years	10 – 13

Food Portions Supplying 2mg Iron

<i>Beef or lamb, lean, cooked</i>	80g
<i>Chicken drumstick, lean, cooked</i>	200g
<i>Liver cooked</i>	20g
<i>Breakfast cereal, iron fortified</i>	1/3 cup
<i>Infant rice cereal, iron fortified</i>	6 tsp
<i>Broccoli cooked</i>	1 cup
<i>Spinach, cooked</i>	½ cup
<i>Dried apricot</i>	½ cup

(Source Fit Kids p60)

Common symptoms of iron deficiency include lethargy, fatigue, dizziness, pale skin, recurrent infections and weight loss. Note though that iron supplements should only be taken on advice from a dietitian or doctor, as some people are susceptible to iron overload which can be toxic.