

How to increase your dietary iron intake in pregnancy

Information for patients

This leaflet provides advice on how to increase the amount of iron in your diet during pregnancy. If you have any concerns or questions, please speak to your midwife or doctor.

Why is iron important in your diet?

Iron is a mineral in your body that is needed to produce healthy red blood cells. Red blood cells provide oxygen to your organs and body tissues as well as that of your baby. When the body does not get enough iron from your diet, you can develop a condition called iron-deficiency anaemia. This is extremely common in pregnancy and is associated with tiredness and weakness.

Most women and birthing people should be able to get enough iron by following a healthy balanced diet, but some may need additional help.

How to increase your iron intake from food.

Red meats (beef, lamb and pork) are rich sources of 'haem' iron, which is well absorbed. Other animal proteins such as fish and poultry also contain iron.

General dietary guidance for health ([Eatwell Guide](#)), advises 'Eat less red meat and processed meat', so the amounts consumed should not exceed about 70g daily. Examples include:

- lean beef, pork, lamb, mince or burgers
- corned beef
- chicken and turkey – especially dark meat, for example, drumsticks
- oily fish such as tuna, sardines, mackerel, pilchards, and salmon (limit tuna to four medium cans per week or two steaks and aim to eat oily fish, for example, salmon, mackerel or sardines, no more than twice per week)

Liver and liver products, such as liver pate or liver sausages, may contain a lot of vitamin A which can harm your baby if consumed in high quantities. It is therefore advisable to avoid these products in pregnancy.

If you follow a vegetarian or plant-based diet, aim to include the following foods, which are also rich in 'non-haem' iron:

- eggs (avoid raw or lightly cooked)
- red kidney beans, black-eye beans, or baked beans (dried or canned varieties)
- dahl, lentils, peas, chickpeas (dried or canned)

- nuts, seeds and dried fruit, for example, apricots, prunes
- bread, chapatti or pitta bread made with wholemeal flour
- dark green leafy vegetables, for example, spinach, kale, broccoli
- soya beans and soy products, for example, tofu

To help with the absorption of iron in your body, it is advisable to consume a food or drink rich in vitamin C alongside an iron-rich food.

Vitamin C sources include:

- fruit, especially citrus fruits, for example, oranges, tangerines, clementines or kiwi
- fruit juices and squash drinks with added vitamin C – avoid if you have been diagnosed with diabetes
- Vegetables, for example, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, potatoes or cauliflower

Teas and coffees (including decaffeinated versions) can reduce the absorption of iron as they contain tannins. We advise you to avoid consuming these drinks with your main meals.

Breakfast cereals high in added wheat bran (for example, bran-containing cereals) contain phytates that make it difficult to absorb iron.

Will I be checked for anaemia during my pregnancy?

You will have a routine full blood count test at booking and at 28 weeks, which will tell us if you are anaemic. Your midwife may also offer you additional blood tests, which look for deficiencies in components that contribute to the formation of red blood cells if you are experiencing symptoms of anaemia.

If iron deficiency anaemia is confirmed despite an iron-rich diet, you may be offered iron tablets or liquid, with guidance on how to take these. Sometimes we may find that you have deficiencies in Vitamin B12 or B9 (folate), contributing to the formation of abnormally large red blood cells that do not function properly, leading to symptoms of anaemia. Other treatment options for these deficiencies will be discussed with you.

Please speak to your midwife, or doctor for further information about the advice given in this leaflet.

General advice

The following pages on the NHS website have useful information, and hints about leading a healthy lifestyle in pregnancy:

- Have a healthy diet in pregnancy www.nhs.uk/pregnancy/keeping-well/have-a-healthy-diet/
- Foods to avoid in pregnancy www.nhs.uk/pregnancy/keeping-well/foods-to-avoid/
- Iron deficiency anaemia www.nhs.uk/conditions/iron-deficiency-anaemia/
- Vitamin B12 or folate deficiency anaemia www.nhs.uk/conditions/vitamin-b12-or-folate-deficiency-anaemia/

The British Dietetic Association has a useful factsheet on iron deficiency and iron rich foods:

- www.bda.uk.com/resource/iron-rich-foods-iron-deficiency.html

Example portion sizes

It is recommended during pregnancy that you have 14.8mg of iron per day as per the UK Reference Nutrient Intake (RNI)).



Medium
steak =
about 4mg
to 5mg iron



200g tofu (half a
typical packet) =
about 6mg
to 10mg iron



200g baked
beans (half a
can) = about
2mg iron



30g pumpkin
seeds (about
1.5 tbsp) =
about 3mg iron



2 Weetabix =
about 4.5mg
iron



80g cooked
spinach = about
2mg to 3mg
iron



1 cup cooked
lentils =
about 6mg
iron



5 to 6 dried
apricots =
about 1mg to
2mg iron

PALS

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) is a service that offers support, information and assistance to patients, relatives and visitors. They can also provide help and advice if you have a concern or complaint that staff have not been able to resolve for you. They can also pass on praise or thanks to our teams.

Tel: 020 3299 4618

Email: kings.pals@nhs.net

If you would like the information in this leaflet in a different language or format, please contact our Interpreting and Accessible Communication Support on 020 3299 4618 or email kings.access@nhs.net