

## Department of Nutrition and Dietetics

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### Iron Intake During Pregnancy

*This dietary advice sheet gives some general information to help you make the recommended changes to your diet. If you need more detailed advice, or if you are following a special diet that makes it difficult to make these changes, please ask your doctor to refer you to a registered dietitian.*

#### Why do I need iron?

Iron is essential for good health, especially healthy red blood cells. Red blood cells carry oxygen around your body to your organs and tissues, as well to your baby. In pregnancy, the amount of blood in your body increases by almost 50%. This means you need more iron than usual during pregnancy to make sure that you and your baby have an adequate supply. A lack of iron can cause anaemia, which can make you feel tired, low in energy and short of breath. A good balanced diet is important to make sure you get enough iron. You should therefore include iron-rich foods as part of your daily diet.

#### How can I improve my iron intake?

Some foods contain more iron than others. The following foods are good sources of iron:

- Red meat, oily fish, and eggs
- Dark green leafy vegetables such as curly kale
- Pulses and legumes such as beans, peas and lentils
- Soya beans and soya products such as tofu
- Nuts, seeds and dried fruit such as dried apricots, figs, dates and prunes
- Foods that have been fortified with iron such as fortified breakfast cereals and some breads

The iron in plant-based foods such as kale, beans and soya are not absorbed as well as that from meat and eggs. Eating plant-based iron with animal protein foods can help your body absorb the iron.

As well as choosing foods that contain iron, it is important to make sure you are eating foods that help iron get absorbed into your body. Fresh or frozen fruits and vegetables containing vitamin C can help the body absorb iron. These include oranges, kiwi fruit, strawberries, bell peppers, potatoes, cauliflower, and broccoli.

Large amounts of certain foods and drinks can make it harder for your body to absorb iron. These include:

- Foods that contain phytates such as bran-containing cereals and beans, peas and lentils

- Drinks that contain tannins such as tea and coffee (including decaf versions), especially when drinking them with a meal.

### **Tips to ensure an iron rich diet:**

- Add green leafy vegetables to main meals
- Add dried fruit and/or nuts to desserts and have as snacks between meals
- Try iron fortified products
- Avoid drinking tea or coffee during or after main meals.

### **Are there any foods I should avoid during pregnancy?**

Foods to avoid due to their possible risks to your baby:

- Liver and liver products such as pâté are rich in iron but are not recommended during pregnancy because of their high vitamin A content. This can be harmful to an unborn baby.
- Game meats such as partridge or pheasant as they may contain lead shot.
- You should limit tuna to no more than 2 tuna steaks or 4 medium-size cans of tuna (about 140g when drained) per week due to potential high mercury content
- You should eat no more than 2 portions of oily fish per week such as salmon, trout, mackerel, or herring as they can contain pollutants.
- Raw and partially cooked hen eggs that are not British Lion or produced under the Laid in Britain scheme or duck, goose or quail eggs.
- You can have caffeine but try to have no more than 200mg daily. For example, there is 100mg of caffeine in a mug of instant coffee, 75mg in a mug of tea, 40mg in a can of cola and 80mg in a 250ml can of energy drink.

Latest allergy prevention advice suggests that it is fine to eat peanuts and tree nuts during pregnancy unless you are allergic to them yourself.

### **Further information and support**

Healthy eating in pregnancy - Start for Life - NHS ([www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk))

[Pregnancy and diet | British Dietetic Association \(BDA\)](#)

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