

# HEALTHY BEGINNINGS

## IRON AND YOUR CHILD

Iron is an important mineral that helps make red blood cells, carries oxygen to muscles and other cells, and helps with brain development.

If iron-rich foods are not offered regularly, it can lead to iron deficiency, which can affect growth, concentration and learning.

Signs of iron deficiency include:

- Irritability (cranky) or headaches
- Feeling tired or weak
- Shortness of breath
- Dizziness or light-headedness
- Slow weight gain
- Pale skin
- Cold hands and feet
- Low appetite

### THE TWO TYPES OF IRON

**Heme iron** is found in animal products like meat, poultry and fish. It is the easiest form of iron for your body to absorb.

**Non-heme iron** is found in vegetables, enriched or fortified whole grains and plant-based proteins like legumes, dried fruit and nuts. It is not as well absorbed by the body.

### VEGETARIANS NEED MORE IRON

Since the iron in vegetarian diets (depending on what type of vegetarian) is mostly or all non-

heme iron, vegetarians need almost twice the iron as non-vegetarians.

### BABIES AND IRON

Babies have iron stores that last about six months. Once your baby starts solid foods, here is how to help them get enough iron:

- Introduce iron-rich foods as their first food (e.g. iron-fortified infant cereals, meat or plant-based proteins like beans or lentils)
- Continue to offer iron-rich foods at least twice daily. Once they are 12 months, offer iron-rich foods at all meals
- Wait until at least 9 months to offer cow's milk as their main milk since it has no iron

### HELPING THE BODY ABSORB IRON BETTER

**Vitamin C** helps absorb non-heme iron so serve foods with vitamin C (fruit and/or vegetables) with meals and snacks

**Heme iron** also helps absorb non-heme iron so include meat, poultry or fish with vegetables, legumes or whole grains

### READING FOOD LABELS

Look for the percent daily value (% DV) on the Nutrition Facts table to compare or know if the product or food is:

### PUBLIC HEALTH

1-877-464-9675  
TTY 1-866-512-6228  
[york.ca/feedingkids](http://york.ca/feedingkids)

- **A source of iron** - contains at least 5% DV
- **A good source of iron** - contains at least 15% DV per serving
- **An excellent source of iron** - contains at least 25% DV per serving

## WHAT ABOUT IRON SUPPLEMENTS?

Iron supplements are rarely needed. If iron-rich foods are not being eaten, talk to a health care provider. If a supplement is needed, follow the instructions and store it in a safe place.

## FOODS THAT ARE A SOURCE OF IRON

\* Caution as these foods are a choking hazard for children under four years of age

### Protein foods (heme iron)

- Beef, veal and lamb
- Certain fish (bass, herring, light canned tuna, Pacific mackerel, sardines, Rainbow trout), with bones removed
- Chicken and dark-meat turkey
- Ham

### Protein foods (non-heme iron)

- Beans (white, red, lima, baked, navy)
- Certain nuts\* (almonds, cashews, hazelnuts, pistachios)
- Certain seeds\* (hulled pumpkin seeds, sesame seeds, hulled sunflower seeds)
- Chickpeas and hummus
- Edamame (young, green soybeans)
- Eggs
- Lentils and black-eyed peas
- Tahini (sesame butter)
- Tofu and tempeh

### Whole grains (non-heme iron)

- Certain fortified breakfast and infant cereals
- Oatmeal (instant, quick oats)
- Fortified pasta (spaghetti, macaroni)
- Wheat germ
- Bread, pita or naan

## Vegetables and fruit (non-heme iron)

- Beets and beet greens
- Canned pumpkin
- Dried longan\* (Asian dried fruit)
- Peas (green, snow)
- Tomato sauce
- Spinach
- Sweet potatoes

## FOODS THAT ARE NOT A SOURCE OF IRON

- Rice - including rice-based traditional foods like congee, even when made with meat
- Milk – drinking too much milk can cause low iron levels. If your child is not breastfeeding, offer 2 cups (500 mL) of milk per day
- Yogurt, cheese and other milk products
- Most vegetables and fruit

## IDEAS TO GET MORE IRON

- Offer protein foods at two meals per day
- If your child is vegetarian, offer eggs and/or non-heme protein foods at most meals
- Add beans, chickpeas, and lentils to casseroles, soups, stews and salads
- Add infant cereal, wheat germ and ground nuts or seeds to muffin, pancake, burger or meatloaf recipes
- Prepare tomato or meat sauces instead of white or cream sauces
- Make homemade baked sweet potato fries
- If you offer a meat or fish congee, double or triple the meat or fish in the recipe
- Cook using an iron skillet or wok which transfers some iron to the foods
- Search online for recipes using words like “iron rich recipes” or “recipes, kids, iron”

For more information and additional nutrition resources, visit [york.ca/feedingkids](http://york.ca/feedingkids) or [unlockfood.ca](http://unlockfood.ca)

To speak to a registered dietitian at no cost, call Telehealth Ontario at 1-866-797-0000.

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