PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Iron in Your Diet

This information describes how to take in the amount of iron your body needs to stay healthy.

Iron is an essential mineral that your body needs to create red blood cells. Red blood cells store and carry oxygen throughout your body. Iron is also part of many proteins and enzymes that help you stay healthy.

Your daily intake of iron

The Institute of Medicine recommends certain amounts of iron based on your age and sex. You can see these recommendations in the following "Recommended Daily Iron Intake" table. Iron is measured in milligrams (mg).

Recommended daily iron intake		
Age	**Males**	**Females**
7 to 12 months	11 mg	11 mg
1 to 3 years	7 mg	7 mg
4 to 8 years	10 mg	10 mg
9 to 13 years	8 mg	8 mg
14 to 18 years	11 mg	15 mg
19 to 50 years	8 mg	18 mg
51 years and older	8 mg	8 mg

Iron deficiency anemia

If your body is not getting enough iron, you can develop a condition called iron deficiency anemia. This can happen if you:

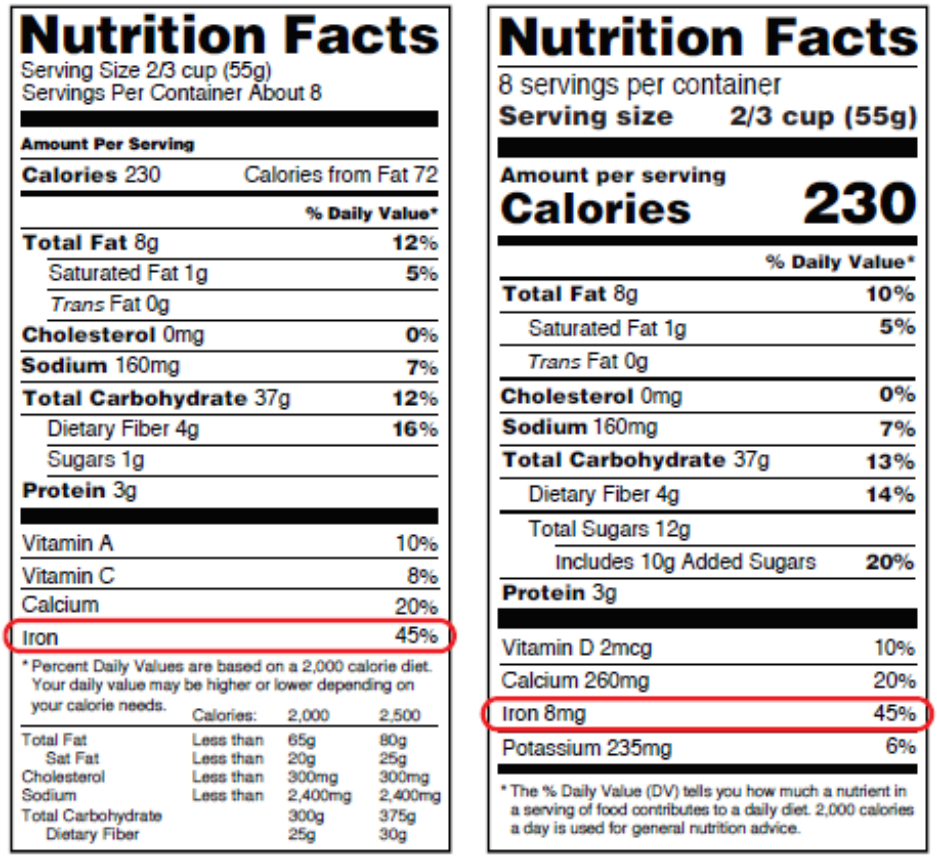
- Do not have enough iron in your diet.
- Have had recent chemotherapy or radiation therapy.
- Have a chronic (long-lasting) illness.
- Have lost some of your blood (for example, through heavy menstrual bleeding, through an accident, or during surgery).

Iron supplements

If your iron level is low, your healthcare provider may prescribe iron supplements. Taking iron supplements will help get your iron level to return to normal quickly. The amount of iron your healthcare provider recommends may be higher than what you see in the “Recommended Daily Iron Intake” table.

Taking higher amounts of iron can cause an upset stomach and constipation (having fewer bowel movements than usual). Tell your healthcare provider if you have these or any other problems while you’re taking iron. Do not take any iron supplements without talking with your healthcare provider first.

Reading nutrition facts labels



Nutrition Facts
Serving Size 2/3 cup (55g)
Servings Per Container About 8

Amount Per Serving

Calories 230	Calories from Fat 72
	% Daily Value*
Total Fat 8g	**12%**
Saturated Fat 1g	**5%**
Trans Fat 0g	
Cholesterol 0mg	**0%**
Sodium 160mg	**7%**
Total Carbohydrate 37g	**12%**
Dietary Fiber 4g	**16%**
Sugars 1g	
Protein 3g	
Vitamin A	10%
Vitamin C	8%
Calcium	20%
Iron	45%

* Percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000 calorie diet. Your daily value may be higher or lower depending on your calorie needs.

	Calories:	2,000	2,500
Total Fat	Less than	65g	80g
Sat Fat	Less than	20g	25g
Cholesterol	Less than	300mg	300mg
Sodium	Less than	2,400mg	2,400mg
Total Carbohydrate		300g	375g
Dietary Fiber		25g	30g

Nutrition Facts
8 servings per container
Serving size **2/3 cup (55g)**

Amount per serving
Calories **230**

	% Daily Value*
Total Fat 8g	**10%**
Saturated Fat 1g	**5%**
Trans Fat 0g	
Cholesterol 0mg	**0%**
Sodium 160mg	**7%**
Total Carbohydrate 37g	**13%**
Dietary Fiber 4g	**14%**
Total Sugars 12g	
Includes 10g Added Sugars	**20%**
Protein 3g	
Vitamin D 2mcg	10%
Calcium 260mg	20%
Iron 8mg	45%
Potassium 235mg	6%

* The % Daily Value (DV) tells you how much a nutrient in a serving of food contributes to a daily diet. 2,000 calories a day is used for general nutrition advice.

Figure 1. Iron content on Nutrition Facts labels

To help keep your iron level healthy, you should eat foods that are high in iron. You can see how much iron a food has by checking the Nutrition Facts label (see Figure 1). On Nutrition Facts labels, the amount of iron is listed as a percent (%) of the daily value. The daily value for iron is 18 mg per day.

- If the food has 5% or less of the daily value, it is a poor source of iron.
- If the food has 10% to 19% of the daily value, it is a good source of iron.
- If the food has 20% or more of the daily value, it is high in iron.

You can figure out exactly how much iron a food has. To do this, multiply the daily value for iron (18 mg) by the % daily value in 1 serving of the food. For example, if a Nutrition Facts label says it provides 50% of the daily value for iron, then multiply 18 mg by 50% (0.5). When you multiply 18 by 0.5, it equals 9. This means 1 serving of that food has 9 mg of iron.

The daily value for iron in the “Recommended Daily Iron Intake” table is only a guideline. You may need more or less iron than the daily value. Talk with your healthcare provider to know how much iron you should be getting each day.

Helping your body absorb iron

Iron from animal sources, called heme iron, is easiest for your body to absorb (take in). Iron from plant sources, called nonheme iron, is harder for your body to absorb. Most nonheme iron is found in plant foods, such as whole grains, nuts, seeds, legumes, beans, and leafy greens.

You can help your body absorb more iron by doing the following:

- Eat foods or supplements that have iron and foods that are high in vitamin C during the same meal. Examples of foods that are high in vitamin C include oranges, other citrus fruits, tomatoes, broccoli, and strawberries.
- Eat both animal and plant sources of iron. For examples of animal and plant sources of iron, read the “Choosing Foods With Iron” section.
- Use a cast iron pan to cook foods that are high in iron. Doing this will add more iron into your food.
- If your healthcare provider prescribes iron supplements, ask if you should take 2 or 3 small doses instead of 1 larger dose. Your body will absorb more of the iron if you take it in smaller doses that are spread out over the day. Make sure to drink 1 (8-ounce) glass of water when you take each dose.

Some things make it harder for your body to absorb iron. Follow these guidelines.

- If you drink coffee or tea, drink it between your meals, not with them. This includes all types of coffee and tea, including regular and decaffeinated coffee and black and green tea.
- Do not eat more than 30 grams of fiber a day.
- Do not eat foods that are high in calcium at the same time as foods that are high in iron. Examples of foods that are high in calcium include dairy

products and calcium-fortified juices, such as orange juice.

Choosing foods with iron

Use a kitchen scale to measure foods listed in ounces.

Animal Sources of Iron	
Source	**Amount of Iron**
Cuttlefish, 3 ounces	9.2 mg
Oysters, 3 ounces	8 mg
Liverwurst spread, ¼ cup	4.9 mg
Queen crab, 3 ounces	2.5 mg
Beef (ground), 3 ounces	2.0 mg
Canned anchovies, 1 ounce	1.3 mg
Chicken, 3 ounces	0.9 mg
Turkey drumstick, 3 ounces	0.9 mg
Pork, 3 ounces	0.8 mg
Egg, 1 large	1.0 mg
Scallops, 3 ounces	0.5 mg
Turkey breast, 3 ounces	1.0 mg

Plant sources of iron	
Source	**Amount of iron**
Total™ cereal, ¾ cup, fortified cereal, 1 serving	18 mg
Kidney beans, ½ cup	2.0 mg
Cooked spinach, ½ cup	3.0 mg
Dark chocolate (60-69%), 1 ounce	2.0 mg
Chickpeas, ½ cup	2.0 mg

Speak with a dietitian

If you have any questions or concerns about your diet while you're in the hospital, ask to see a dietitian. If you have already been discharged (released) from the hospital and have questions about your diet, you can still talk with a dietitian. Call 212-639-7312 to make an appointment with an outpatient clinical dietitian nutritionist. You can reach a staff member Monday through Friday, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

Iron in Your Diet - Last updated on August 20, 2026
All rights owned and reserved by Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center