

Iron in your child's diet

Information and advice for parents and carers

Paediatrics

What is iron?

Iron is a mineral found in a limited number of foods that is needed by our body for healthy blood. It produces red blood cells which carry oxygen around the body. It is also needed for growth and brain development.

Vitamin C helps the body to absorb more iron from food so it is also important to include vitamin C containing foods in your child's diet.

What happens if a child does not get enough iron?

If a child does not have enough iron in their diet they will become iron-deficient and if their iron levels fall low enough they may develop anaemia which will require treatment. A lack of iron may cause a child to look pale, become tired more easily, become irritable and have a poor appetite. Their growth and development may also slow down and they may have more frequent infections.

Good sources of iron

0-1 year olds

Babies are born with a good store of iron but once they are 6 months old, they need to have some iron-rich foods every day. All babies should continue with breast milk or baby milk until they are at least 1 year old.

Baby meals (jars, cans and packet) are useful if you do not have time to prepare baby food yourself however they can be expensive to buy. Foods you prepare yourself are cheaper and encourage familiarity with common foods.

Foods to include which are good sources of iron:

Babies 4-6 months

- Breast milk or infant formula
- Pureed vegetables such as spinach, peas and broccoli
- Pureed meats such as beef and lamb. Chicken and turkey also contain some iron
- Pureed lentils (dahls) and beans e.g. red lentils, butter beans and chickpeas
- Baby cereals and rusks
- Stage 1 baby foods

Pureed fruits such as pear and apple contain Vitamin C which helps your baby absorb iron more readily.

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Babies 6-9 months

- Breast milk or infant formula (standard infant milk or follow-on milk)
- Mashed green vegetables such as peas, broccoli, cabbage and spinach
- Mashed lentils (including dahl) and beans
- Finely minced or chopped meat and poultry
- Well-cooked, chopped egg
- Baby cereals or fortified breakfast cereals e.g. Weetabix, Ready Brek.
- Stage 2 baby foods

Introduce a Vitamin C rich drink at mealtimes such as fresh juice or give some fruit (fresh or canned).

Babies 9-12 months

- Breast milk or infant formula as main drink (standard or follow-on milk)
- Chopped meats such as lamb, beef and corned beef. Pork, chicken and turkey also contain iron
- Canned fish (bone-free) e.g. salmon and tuna
- Well cooked chopped eggs
- Mashed beans and pulses
- Green vegetables, cut into small pieces
- Fortified breakfast cereals

At mealtimes, continue to give a Vitamin C rich drink e.g. fruit juice or fruit cut into chunks or sticks.

1 year and over

Young children over 1 year will benefit from continuing with a baby milk or follow-on formula if they are short of iron or they are not having a good balance of foods. Discuss which milk is best for your child with your health visitor, nurse or doctor.

Aim to give 3-4 helpings of iron containing foods each day:

Animal Sources (the iron from these foods is well absorbed)

- Toddler milks (suitable from 1 year)
- Red meats - beef, lamb, pork, ham, corned beef, bacon, liver and liver pate
- Poultry - chicken, turkey (dark meat contains more iron)
- Meat dishes - cottage pie, meat curries, stews, casseroles, sausages and lamb kebabs
- Oily fish - sardines, pilchards and salmon

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- Fish and meat pastes
- Eggs and egg dishes e.g. quiche and scrambled egg

Cereal and vegetable sources (these foods contain some iron)

- Peas, beans and lentils, including dahls
- Green vegetables e.g. broccoli, spinach, cabbage
- Fortified breakfast cereals, bread and flour
- Dried fruit e.g. soft apricots, figs
- Peanut butter and Tahini paste (sesame paste)

NB. Iron is more easily absorbed from meat (especially red meat), fish and eggs.

Is there anything that helps the body absorb iron?

Drinks rich in Vitamin C (diluted unsweetened orange juice, sugar free squash with added Vitamin C and baby juices) are a useful way of helping the body absorb iron from cereal and plant foods, and are particularly good to give with meals. Try to use a beaker or cup, as this is the safest for teeth.

Is there anything that prevents the body absorbing iron?

Polyphenols are substances in tea and coffee which stop iron being absorbed into the body, so these are not appropriate drinks for children. Phytates also stop iron being absorbed; this is a substance found in chapatti so it is best to give other starchy food such as rice and bread instead of chapatti.

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Contact details

If you have any questions or concerns or need more information please contact your child's dietitian on 0121 507 3521 (Monday – Friday, 9am – 5pm).

Further information

For more information about our hospitals and services please see our websites www.swbh.nhs.uk and www.swbhengage.com, or follow us on Twitter @SWBHnhs and Facebook www.facebook.com/SWBHnhs.

Sources used for the information in this leaflet

- Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition, 'Iron and health', 2010
- Food Standards Agency, 'McCance and Widdowson's The Composition of Foods', 2002

If you would like to suggest any amendments or improvements to this leaflet please contact the communications department on 0121 507 5420 or email: swb-tr.swbh-gm-patient-information@nhs.net



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