

The Iron Age

Information and advice for parents and carers

Paediatrics

This leaflet is to help you understand why iron is important in the body and give ideas on how to include iron rich foods in your child's diet.

Why is iron important?

Iron forms part of a substance in the blood called haemoglobin, which carries oxygen around the body. It is also needed for growth and brain development.

What happens if any child does not get enough iron?

They become iron deficient and if the level falls low enough, anaemia develops. They may look pale and become tired more easily, irritable and have a poor appetite. Other signs are a slowing down in growth and development and more frequent infections.

Is anaemia serious?

It can become serious if not treated as soon as possible because iron is so important for the body. Your doctor will prescribe iron medicine and it is important that it is given to your child **every** day. At the same time, it is important to make changes to your child's diet so they are getting iron from their food.

What foods should I be giving?

0-1 year olds

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

Foods to include which are good sources of iron:

Babies 4-6 months

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

Puree 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/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 well-diluted 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. well diluted pure fruit juice or fruit cut into chunks or sticks.

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.

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1 year and over

Young children over one 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. Please note: Follow on milks (Progress, Step Up, Follow On) are not available on tokens.

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

Foods which are good sources of iron:

Animal Sources

The iron from these foods is well absorbed:

- Baby milk e.g. Premium, SMA Gold, Step Up and Progress.
- 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.
- 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).

Iron is more easily absorbed if eaten with some animal protein e.g. meat, poultry or a Vitamin C rich drink e.g. diluted pure fruit juice or fruit.

Drinks

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.

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Can I give tea or coffee?

Tea and coffee are not appropriate drinks for children, as they will stop iron being absorbed into the body. If you really feel you want to give it, only give occasionally when a meal is not being eaten and make it very weak. Avoid giving tea and coffee to babies under one year.

Further information

National Health Service (2019) *What to feed young children*. Available at: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/baby/weaning-and-feeding/what-to-feed-young-children/> (Accessed 15 April 2021).

Produced by the Sandwell and Nutrition Dietetic Service in consultation with other health professionals and doctors.

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