



The Oregon Clinic - Gastroenterology

High/Low Iron Diet

Purpose

Iron is a mineral essential for life. Found in red blood cells, iron's primary role is to carry oxygen from the lungs to the rest of the body. Without oxygen, the body's cells cannot function normally.

If the body's iron stores become too low, an iron-deficiency anemia can occur. This is characterized by weakness, lethargy, muscle fatigue, and shortness of breath. In severe cases, a person's skin may become pale due to a lack of red blood cells in the body.

In adults, iron deficiency is most commonly caused by chronic blood loss, such as with heavy menstruation or intestinal bleeding from peptic ulcers, cancer, or hemorrhoids. In children, iron deficiency is usually the result of an inadequate iron intake.

Nutrition Facts

The recommended dietary allowance (RDA) for iron in healthy adults is 10 milligrams per day for men and 15 milligrams per day for premenopausal women. Premenopausal women's needs are higher than men's needs because women lose iron during menstruation.

It is generally easier for men to get enough iron than it is for women. Because they are usually bigger, men have higher calorie needs and will most likely eat enough food to meet their iron requirements. Women, on the other hand, tend to eat less. This makes it more difficult for them to meet their iron needs. It is, therefore, particularly important for premenopausal women to eat foods high in iron.

Pregnant women will need as much as 30 milligrams of iron per day. The main reason is because the unborn baby needs iron for development. As a result, it will draw from the mother's iron stores. This can quickly deplete a woman of iron if she is not eating enough iron rich foods.

The following table lists foods high in iron. In general, meat, fish, and poultry are excellent sources. Other sources of iron include beans, dried fruits, whole grains, fortified cereals, and enriched breads.

There are some instances in which a high iron diet can be harmful. For example, those suffering from hemochromatosis need to avoid iron rich foods. Hemochromatosis is a common hereditary disorder where the body loses its ability to regulate the amount of iron that is absorbed and stored. Without a regulatory process, dangerously large amounts of iron can build up. This can lead to severe damage to the liver, heart, and pancreas.

Chronic liver disease, from many causes, can result in excessive amounts of iron being stored in the liver. In many instances, this actually aggravates the damage to the liver. In the treatment of chronic hepatitis C, for example, it is now known that reducing iron stores by removal of blood actually improves treatment.

Special Considerations

1. Heme and nonheme iron are two forms of iron in foods. Heme iron is found in meats, poultry, and fish. Non-Heme iron is found in both plant and animal foods. Heme iron is more easily absorbed by the body than non-heme iron. However, heme iron can also promote the absorption of non-heme iron. Therefore, eating beef and beans, for example, is good for providing adequate absorption of both types of iron.
2. Vitamin C also promotes iron absorption. This is true for both heme and non-heme iron. It is, therefore, beneficial to consume citrus fruits or juices, which are high in vitamin C, with foods that contain iron. For example, a meal might include a lean sirloin steak (heme iron source), baked potato (non-heme iron source), broccoli (non-heme iron source), and an orange (vitamin C source) for a good iron intake.
3. Phytic and tannic acids are two food components that, when consumed in large amounts, prevent the absorption of iron. Phytic acid is found in rye bread and other foods made from whole grains. Phytic acid is also found in non-herbal teas. Tannic acid is found in commercial black and pekoe teas, coffee, cola drinks, chocolate, and red wines.
4. Iron Supplements - There are many different kinds of iron supplements. However, iron supplements should only be taken when there is a true deficiency of iron and only under medical supervision. General multivitamins often have iron and other minerals added to them in

moderate amounts. If otherwise healthy, this amount of iron is probably not harmful. If iron is to be avoided, multivitamins containing iron should not be used. Please note that it is important to keep iron and multivitamin supplements safely away from a child's reach. If ingested, severe poisoning can occur.

Foods That Contain Iron		
<i>Food</i>	<i>Serving Size</i>	<i>(mg)</i>
Bran flakes cereal	1 cup	24.0
Product 19 cereal	1 cup	24.0
Clams, steamed	3 oz	23.8
Total cereal	1 cup	18.0
Life cereal	1 cup	12.2
Raisin bran cereal	1 cup	9.3
Beef liver, braised	3 oz	5.8
Kix cereal	1 cup	5.4
Cheerios cereal	1 cup	3.6
Prune juice	1 cup	3.0
Potato, baked with skin	1 med	2.8
Sirloin steak, cooked	3 oz	2.8
Shrimp, cooked	3 oz	2.6
Navy beans, cooked	1/2 cup	2.3
Figs, dried	5	2.1
Lean ground beef, broiled	3 oz	2.1
Swiss chard, cooked	1/2 cup	2.0
Rice krispies cereal	1 cup	1.8
Kidney beans	1/2 cup	1.6
Oatmeal, cooked	1/2 cup	1.6
Spinach, raw	1 cup	1.5
Tuna, canned in water	3 oz	1.3
Green peas, conked	1/2 cup	1.2
Halibut, cooked	3 oz	0.9
Whole-wheat bread	1 slice	0.9
Apricot halves, dried	5	0.8
Raisins	1/4 cup	0.8
Broccoli, cooked	1/2 cup	0.6
Egg, boiled	1 large	0.6

This material does not cover all information and is not intended as a substitute for professional care. Please consult with your physician on any matters regarding your health.

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