

Iron for Babies and Young Children

What is iron and why is it important?

Iron is a mineral found in many foods and in your blood. Iron in the blood carries oxygen to all parts of the body. Iron helps build red blood cells, is important for healthy brain development, and helps cells work properly. If your child is not getting enough iron, they could develop anemia. Children with anemia can have a poor appetite, poor weight gain, lack of energy, irritability, and learning difficulties.

Did you know ...

Iron needs increase by 50% during pregnancy.

In the first year of life, babies are growing so fast that they need more iron than many full-grown adults.

Where does iron come from?

From birth to about six months of age:

Full-term babies use the stores of iron that they were born with for the first six months of their life, and they get additional iron from breastmilk. Iron found in breastmilk is very well absorbed. Infant formula should be iron fortified.

At about six months of age:

Around six months of age, your baby's iron stores will run out and your baby will need additional iron from food. Offer iron-rich foods as your baby's first foods, such as, beef, chicken, turkey, lamb, fish, pork, whole eggs, tofu, legumes, lentils, and iron fortified infant cereal.

Food contains two forms of iron

Heme iron Heme iron is found in animal foods Our bodies absorb heme iron the best.			Non-heme iron Non-heme iron is found in plant foods. Our bodies do not absorb it as well as heme iron.		
					
chicken	beef	fish	whole grain and enriched breads and cereals	lentils, dried peas and beans	dark leafy green vegetables
					
liver	turkey	lamb	eggs, whole cooked	nuts and seeds (including butters)	iron fortified infant cereal

How to increase absorption of non-heme iron

- The body can better use non-heme iron when you eat food containing heme iron at the same time.
- Foods rich in vitamin C can also help your body use non-heme iron. **Vitamin C-rich foods** include:



oranges



cantaloupe



strawberries



broccoli



peppers



tomatoes



potatoes

Does my child need an iron supplement?

Most full-term babies who start eating iron-rich foods at about six months of age usually do not need an iron supplement. Talk to your healthcare provider about iron.

Tips for increasing your child's iron intake

1. Introduce a variety of iron-rich foods when you start solid foods at about six months of age. Babies can eat soft-cooked, mashed meats too.
2. Cow's milk is low in iron, which is why we do not recommend switching to milk until 9-12 months of age. Do not give your child more than 500-750 mL of milk per day. Too much milk will make your child feel full and decrease their appetite for iron-rich foods.
3. Include at least one iron-rich food and one food rich in vitamin C at each meal.
4. Add cooked dried beans or lentils to soups, stews and casseroles.
5. Use iron-fortified infant cereal in pancakes or biscuits. Try adding oatmeal, molasses, fruit or nut butters to boost nutrition.

Iron Boosting Muffins

250 mL (1 cup) whole wheat flour
125 mL (1/2 cup) sugar
10 mL (2 tsp) baking powder
250 mL (1 cup) infant cereal, any variety

125 mL (1/2 cup) water
60 mL (1/4 cup) oil
3 eggs, beaten

Instructions

Preheat oven to 180°C (350°F). Mix flour, sugar, baking powder and infant cereal together in a large bowl. Mix water, oil and eggs in a separate bowl. Combine wet and dry ingredients only until blended. Spoon batter into paper lined muffin cups. Bake for about 20 minutes.

Makes 12 regular or 24 mini muffins. Moms can eat these muffins too.

For recipe source and more recipes and fact sheet: [HealthLinkBC](https://www.healthlinkbc.ca).