

Iron in the Diet

You've been told your iron is low... now what?

There are multiple reasons why your doctor may have told you your blood count is low. For GI patients this is often a result of bleeding, but it could be that iron stores are low due to malabsorption or poor dietary intake. If you have heard your blood count is low you might be wondering what this means. This is referring to labs known as hemoglobin and hematocrit. Hemoglobin is a part of the blood that carries oxygen from the lungs to the rest of the body. Iron is a major component of hemoglobin. When these labs are low you may feel tired or run down. You may also experience headaches, pale skin, and brittle hair and/or nails.

Lab Values (Hemoglobin)

These may vary depending on the lab used, but in general these are the ranges you will find as “normal”

Men: 13.8-17.2 g/dL

Women: 12.1-15.1 g/dL

Although the reason for your low iron may not be related to your diet intake in the past, you may still benefit from getting enough iron in the diet. Your doctor may suggest you need to take iron pills. This is not uncommon when your iron stores are really low since it can take a while for dietary intake to make a big difference. The good news is that we can get iron from a variety of foods, both meat and non-meat sources, so you can easily get iron from the diet and help boost the iron in your blood.

Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA) for Iron Intake Daily

Men: 8 milligrams

Women: 18 milligrams (19-50 years); 8 milligrams (51+ years)

Pregnancy: 27 milligrams

Many people will think of red meat as the best or main source of iron in the diet. While red meat is a good source of iron, there are many other ways to get in iron. This is good news because it is best to limit how much red meat you eat weekly to help with overall health. Choose lean cuts of red meat if you are including this in your diet. Seafood, particularly oysters, is another excellent sources, with 8 milligrams in a 3-ounce serving.

Boosting Iron Absorption

Vitamin C boosts iron absorption, which means eating vitamin C rich foods alongside iron rich foods will help make sure you get the most out of the iron you consume in your diet. Many fruits and vegetables are high in vitamin C. However, if your doctor has told you that you have acid reflux or GERD, they may encourage you to limit foods that are very acidic, which will limit high vitamin C foods. It would be best in that case to limit intake of foods like citrus and tomatoes and to stick to foods that are naturally high in iron.

Heme versus Non-Heme Iron in the Diet

Dietary iron that comes from an animal source is known as heme iron. When the iron is found in plant based sources it is known as non-heme iron. Generally, the heme iron is better absorbed in the body, but that doesn't mean you need to rely on only heme sources for meeting your iron needs. If you are vegetarian or vegan your dietary iron needs will about double just because it is harder for the body to absorb iron from plant based sources. Some breakfast cereals are fortified with 100% of your needs for iron. This may be a good choice but you will still want to get more iron from a variety of sources throughout the day.

Sources of Dietary Iron

Food	Serving Size	Amount in milligrams
Oatmeal, fortified	1 cup	10.0
Soybeans (edamame), boiled	1 cup	8.8
Oysters	3 ounce	8.0
Dry cereal	Varies, check Nutrition Facts on label	4.0-4.3
Tofu, cooked	½ cup	3.4
Beef, lean	3 ounce	3.2
Spinach, cooked	½ cup	3.0
Lentils, cooked	½ cup	3.0
Shrimp	2.5 ounce	2.3
Lima beans, cooked	½ cup	2.2
Beans, cooked	½ cup	2.0
Potato, skin on	1 medium	2.0
Cashews	1 ounce	2.0
White bread, enriched Or whole wheat bread	2 slices	1.8
Beets, canned	½ cup	1.6
Prune juice	4 ounces (1/2 cup)	1.5
Kale, cooked	½ cup	1.3
Peas, cooked	½ cup	1.3
Chicken (breast), cooked	3 ounce	1.1
Broccoli, cooked	½ cup	0.6

For more information: <http://www.whfoods.com/genpage.php?tname=nutrient&dbid=70> and <http://www.redcrossblood.org/learn-about-blood/health-and-wellness/iron-rich-foods>