



Iron

What is iron and why is it important?

Iron is an important mineral that children need for healthy brain development, learning and growth. It also helps make healthy red blood cells, which carry oxygen around the body.

If your child does not get enough iron, their iron stores can become low. If this continues, they may develop iron deficiency anaemia. Low iron can cause tiredness, headaches and poor appetite. Some children may also have problems with learning, behaviour and growth.

Who is at risk of low iron?

Some children have a higher risk of low iron stores, including:

- Babies who have not started solids by around six months
- Babies born prematurely who may not have built up good iron stores
- Children who are picky or selective eaters and eat a limited range of foods
- Children who follow a vegetarian or vegan diet
- Children who drink large amounts of cow's milk
- Children with medical conditions that affect iron absorption or iron needs
- Teenagers who have heavy menstrual bleeding

How much iron does my child need?

How much iron your child needs depends on their age. Below are the Australian Recommended Dietary Intakes (RDIs). Children don't need to reach these amounts every day, but offering iron-rich foods regularly can help them get enough over time.

Age	Iron needed each day
7-12 months	11 mg
1-3 years	9 mg
4-8 years	10 mg
9-13 years	8 mg
14-18 years – girls	15 mg
14-18 years – boys	11 mg

Nutrition and Food Services

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Which foods contain iron?

There are two types of iron in food – haem iron and non-haem iron.

Haem iron is found in animal foods and is well absorbed by the body. Good sources include:

- Meat (e.g. beef, lamb, kangaroo and pork)
- Poultry (e.g. chicken, duck and turkey)
- Fish and shellfish (e.g. sardines, salmon and tuna)
- Offal (e.g. liver and kidney)

Liver is not recommended for babies because it contains very high amounts of vitamin A.

Non-haem iron is found in plant foods. It is not absorbed as easily as haem iron, but it is still an important source of iron in the diet. Good sources include:

- Wholegrains (e.g. wholemeal bread, pasta or flour, rolled oats and wholegrain breakfast cereals)
- Legumes (e.g. baked beans, chickpeas, dried peas, lentils and hummus)
- Tofu and tempeh
- Green leafy vegetables (e.g. spinach, broccoli and bok choy)
- Dried fruit (e.g. sultanas, apricots, dates and prunes)
- Eggs
- Nuts and seeds (e.g. cashews, almonds, pumpkin seeds, tahini and peanut butter)

Avoid whole nuts and seeds for children under three years as they can cause choking. Use nut or seed butters or ground nuts instead.

Iron-fortified foods are foods that have iron added to them. They can be especially useful for children who eat a limited range of foods or who follow a vegetarian or vegan diet. The table below lists some branded food products that are iron fortified. This information should be used as a guide to iron content only and is not intended as an endorsement of any particular product. Food product formulations can change, so always check the label for the most up-to-date iron content.

Food	Brands
Infant cereal	Bellamy's Organic; Nestlé Cerelac
Breakfast cereal	Coles Bran Flakes with Sultanas, Frooty Rings, High Fibre Bran, Mighty Grain, Right Start; Goldenvale Just Bran; Hillcrest Bran & Sultanas, Corn Flakes, Power Grain; Kellogg's All-Bran, Coco Pops (<i>not Chex or Gluten Free</i>), Corn Flakes, Froot Loops, Guardian, Just Right, Nutri-Grain, Rice Bubbles, Special K (<i>not Gluten Free</i>), Sultana Bran, Sustain; Lowan Cocoa Bombs; Nestlé Milo, Nesquick; Sanitarium Weet-Bix; Uncle Toby's Cheerios, Fruity Bites, Oat Crisp, Oat Flakes, Plus Iron; Woolworths Bran Flakes & Sultanas, Cocoa Puffs, High Fibre Bran, Max Charge, Rainbow Rings
Bread	Tip Top The One; Viva; Wonder (<i>not 5 Star</i>); Woolworths High Fibre
Pasta	Bellamy's Organic
Drinks	Nestlé Milo

Tips to help your child get enough iron

There are many simple ways to help your child get more iron out of their food.

Introduce iron-rich solids at around six months. Offer iron-rich foods, including iron-fortified cereals and puréed meat or chicken, when your child starts solids. Make sure the texture is suitable for your child's developmental stage.

Pair iron-rich foods with vitamin C. Vitamin C helps the body absorb non-haem iron from plant foods. Try serving an iron-rich food together with a vitamin C-rich food. Foods containing vitamin C include:

- Fruit (e.g. berries, citrus fruits, pineapple, kiwi fruit and fruit juice)
- Vegetables (e.g. capsicum, broccoli, tomato and cabbage)

Limit large amounts of cow's milk. Cow's milk contains very little iron. Drinking too much can fill your child up, so they may eat less of other foods that contain iron. Large amounts of cow's milk can also reduce iron absorption.

- **Under 12 months**, breast milk or infant formula should be your child's main drink. Cow's milk can be used in foods once solids are introduced.
- **Over 12 months**, cow's milk can be offered as part of a varied diet. Keep intake to no more than 500 mL (around two cups) per day.

Avoid tea, coffee and cola drinks around meals. These drinks can reduce the amount of iron absorbed from food.

Does my child need an iron supplement?

Most children can get enough iron from a varied diet. If you are concerned about your child's iron intake or iron levels, talk to their doctor or dietitian. If your child has low iron stores or iron deficiency, their doctor or dietitian may recommend an iron supplement.

Do not start your child on an iron supplement on your own. Too much iron can be harmful to children. If your child is prescribed an iron supplement, give it exactly as recommended and continue for as long as their doctor or dietitian advises.

Iron-rich meal and snack ideas

See below for some examples of iron-rich meal and snack ideas to try with your child. Iron content will vary depending on portion size, ingredients and brands.

Breakfast

Meal or snack	Iron content	% RDI
1 serve Cerelac infant cereal with water	6 mg	55%
2 Weet-Bix with 1 cup milk, 1 tbsp peanut butter and 2 tbsp sultanas	4 mg	35%
½ cup porridge oats with ½ cup milk, banana and 1 tbsp almond butter	2.5 mg	25%
2 slices Tip Top The One bread with 2 eggs and avocado	6 mg	55%
2 slices Wonder bread with 1 tbsp peanut butter and banana	5 mg	45%
1 slice Viva bread with ½ tin of Heinz baked beans	4 mg	35%
Chia pudding with 2 tbsp chia seeds and milk	2.5 mg	25%

Lunch and dinner

Meal or snack	Iron content	% RDI
2-3 beef tacos with kidney beans, tomato, lettuce, cheese and avocado	3.5 mg	30%
1 cup soup with dried peas or lentils, with 2 slices wholemeal bread	3 mg	30%
Homemade burger with beef patty or falafel, tomato and spinach	2-3 mg	20-30%
Sandwich with 2 slices Tip Top The One bread, ham, cheese, tomato and spinach leaves	5 mg	45%
Sandwich with 2 slices Viva bread, 1 egg or tin of tuna, lettuce and mayonnaise	5 mg	45%
1½ cups spaghetti bolognese made with wholemeal pasta	5 mg	45%
1 cup lentil dhal served with rice	5 mg	45%
1½ cups chicken, beef or tofu stir-fry with broccoli, capsicum, carrot and cashews	3-6 mg	30-55%

Snacks

Meal or snack	Iron content	% RDI
3 tsp Milo with milk	3.5 mg	30%
1 slice Wonder bread with 1 tbsp peanut butter and banana	3 mg	30%
1 slice Viva bread with avocado and 2 tsp chia seeds	2.5 mg	25%
4 dried apricots or dates, handful of cashews and handful of roasted chickpeas	3 mg	30%
2 wholemeal Salada biscuits with 2 tbsp hummus	2 mg	20%
2 wholemeal Salada biscuits with tin of tuna or salmon and avocado	2.5 mg	25%
3 bliss balls made with nut butter, oats and dried fruit	2 mg	20%

RDI based on 11 mg. Remember that adolescent girls have higher iron requirements.