

# Iron for pregnant women

## Iron in the body

Iron is used by the body to carry oxygen. Iron is in haemoglobin. Haemoglobin is in red blood cells.

Your body makes more blood when you are pregnant because you and your baby are growing. It needs iron to make healthy blood. A blood test that looks at haemoglobin (Hb) levels is usually used at some stage in your pregnancy to tell if there is enough iron in your blood.

Having low iron levels will make you feel tired, have poor concentration and a higher risk of infection. Very low iron levels will affect your baby's growth.

## Iron in food

There are two types of iron in food: Iron from animal foods (called **haem** iron) and iron from plant foods (called **non-haem** iron).

Haem iron is taken up by the body about ten times better than non-haem iron. It is nature's iron tablet. Meats are the best source of iron. The redder the meat, the higher it is in iron. This means beef and lamb are higher in iron than pork, chicken or fish. Coloured flesh fish, such as tuna and mullet, are higher in iron than reef fish, such as barramundi.

Non-haem iron is found in some plant foods such as:

- ❖ wholegrain and iron-fortified breads and cereals foods (these are breakfast cereals with added iron)
- ❖ legumes eg. kidney beans, chickpeas
- ❖ green leafy vegetables e.g. spinach, broccoli, bok choy
- ❖ nuts and dried fruit

Remember that iron from non-haem foods is not taken up by the body as well as iron from animal foods. You will need to eat more of these foods if they are your only iron source.

To help your body use iron from plant foods, eat foods high in vitamin C, like fruits and vegetables, or foods containing haem iron (from an animal) at the same meal.

## Iron blockers

Tea, coffee, unprocessed bran and various mineral, herbal and other medications can block plant iron being taken up by the body.

## What to do if your iron levels are low

- ❖ check that you are regularly including animal sources of iron – remember the redder the better
- ❖ include wholegrain and iron fortified foods eg breakfast cereals with added iron
- ❖ include vitamin C foods at meals e.g. orange juice or tomato or capsicum
- ❖ check to make sure you limit the iron blockers
- ❖ after you have tried these hints, if your iron is still low, talk to your doctor about taking iron tablets
- ❖ remember to have your iron levels checked after the baby too.

## Iron tablets

Iron tablets should only be taken when a blood test has confirmed that your levels are low. Women commonly experience constipation from taking iron tablets. You can manage constipation naturally by:

- ❖ eating more unprocessed plant foods like fruits with the skin on, vegetables, whole grains and legumes
- ❖ drinking more water
- ❖ being physically active

## How much iron do you need?

Pregnant women need 27mg iron each day  
Pregnant women should not eat more than 45 mg iron each day.

## How much iron is in food?

Food (serving size)	Iron (mg)
<b><i>Meat and meat alternatives</i></b>	
Lean beef (100g)	3.1
Lean Lamb (100g)	2.5
Chicken (100g)	0.9
Lean Pork (100g)	1.4
Tuna (100g or one small can)	1.0
Sardines (120g or one reg tin)	3.24
Egg (1 egg= 55g)	1.1
Snapper (100g)	0.3
Kidney beans (1/2 cup)	2.1
Baked beans (1 small can = 140g)	2.24
3 bean mix (1/2 cup)	2.0
Tofu (2 large squares = 100g)	5.2
<b><i>Bread and Cereal Foods</i></b>	
Iron fortified breakfast cereal (1 bowl or 2 biscuits = 30g)	3
Non-fortified breakfast cereal (1 bowl or 2 biscuits = 30g)	1

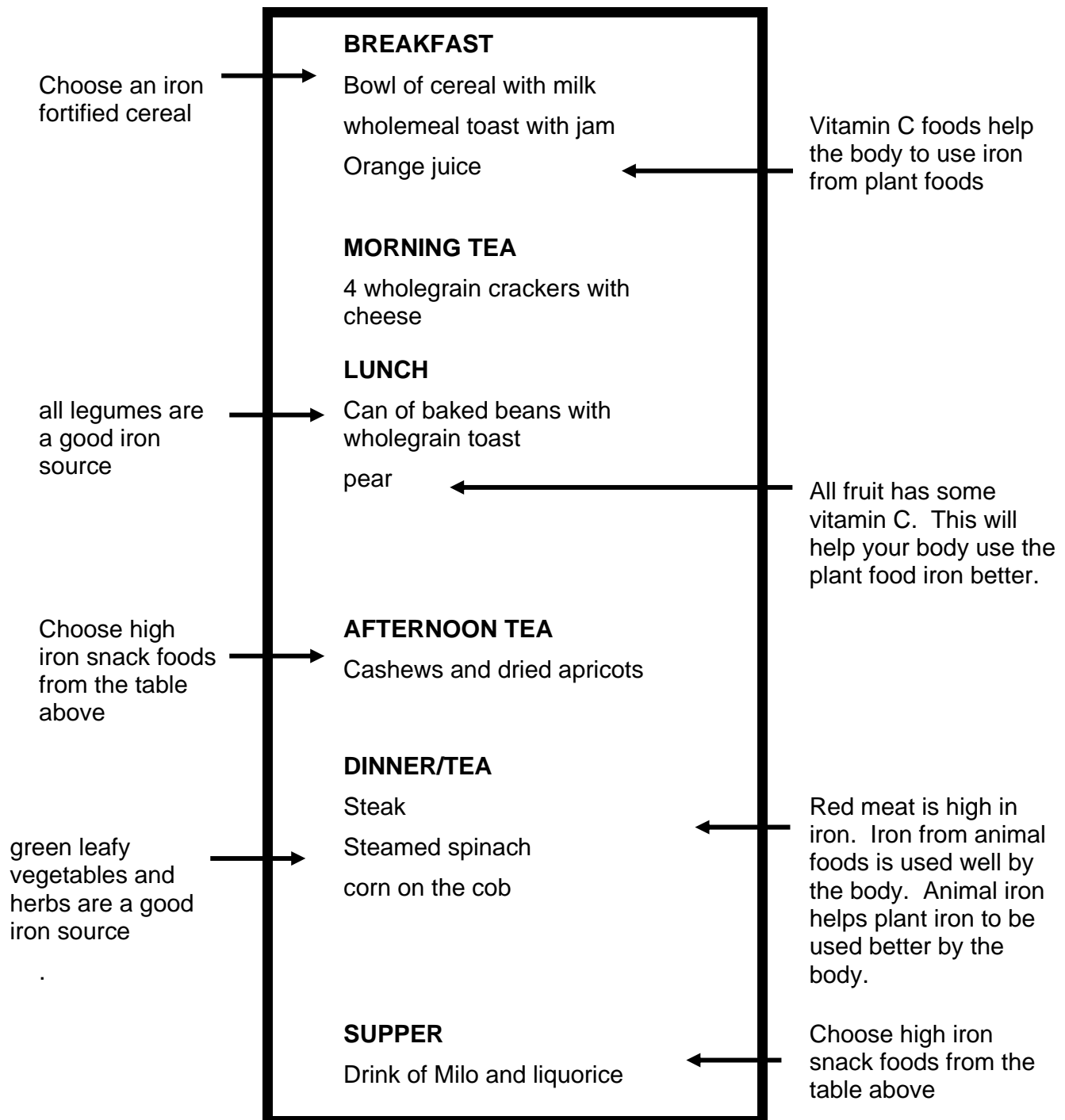
Wholegrain bread (1 slice)	0.63
Wholemeal bread (1 slice)	0.69
White bread (1 slice)	0.36
Brown rice (100g)	0.5
Wholegrain cracker (4 crackers)	0.6
<b><i>Vegetables</i></b>	
½ cup cooked spinach	2.2
5 asparagus spears	1.0
½ cup green beans	1.0
3 slices beetroot	1.2
½ cup cooked silver beet	1.3
½ cup green peas	0.9
<b><i>Snack foods and drinks</i></b>	
Cashews (2-3 tablespoons = 50g)	2.5
Pistachios (2-3 tablespoons = 50g)	1.95
Dried Apricots (8-10 apricot halves)	1.5
Prunes (5-6 prunes)	0.55
Sultanas (1 little box =37g)	0.74
Milo (4 heaped teaspoons)	6
Vegemite (1 tsp)	0.13
Liquorice (1 long strap = 50g)	4.4
Guinness	0.0
Milk	0.0



## How would I plan to eat that much iron in a day?

This meal plan is an example of how you could eat 27mg of iron in a day. It also meets all your other daily nutrient needs during pregnancy:

### SAMPLE MEAL PLAN



**References:**

Nutritional Value of Australian Foods. Australian New Zealand Food Authority. (1991). Commonwealth of Australia  
 Nutrient Reference Values for Australia and New Zealand. National Health and Medical Research Council. (2006)  
 Commonwealth of Australia.