

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. Your doctor may also check your ferritin level. This is a measure of the amount of iron you have stored in your body.

Having low iron levels may result in anaemia. This will make you feel tired, have poor concentration and an increased risk of infection. Very low iron levels will affect your baby's growth and can increase the risk of your baby coming early.

Your iron intake is most important in the final 10 weeks of pregnancy as this is when your baby begins to build its own store of iron ready for the first 6 months of its life. This store is used until your baby starts on iron rich solids.

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. Meats are the best source of iron. The redder the meat, the higher it is in iron.
- This means beef, kangaroo 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 cereal foods (there are foods with added iron)
- Legumes (e.g. kidney beans, baked 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 (such as fruit, tomato or capsicum) or foods containing haem iron (from an animal) at the same meal.

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)
Meat and meat alternatives	
Kangaroo (100 g)	4.4
Lean beef (100 g)	3.1
Lean Lamb (100 g)	2.5
Chicken (100 g)	0.9
Lean Pork (100 g)	1.4
Tuna (100 g or one small can)	1.0
Sardines (120 g or one reg tin)	3.24
Egg (1 egg= 55 g)	1.1
Snapper (100 g)	0.3
Kidney beans (1/2 cup)	2.1
Baked beans (1 sml can=140g)	2.24
3 bean mix (1/2 cup)	2.0
Tofu (2 large squares = 100 g)	5.2
Bread and Cereal Foods	
Iron fortified breakfast cereal (1 bowl or 2 biscuits = 30 g)	3
Non-fortified breakfast cereal (1 bowl or 2 biscuits = 30 g)	1
Wheat biscuits (2 pieces)	3
Oats (1 cup)	1.3

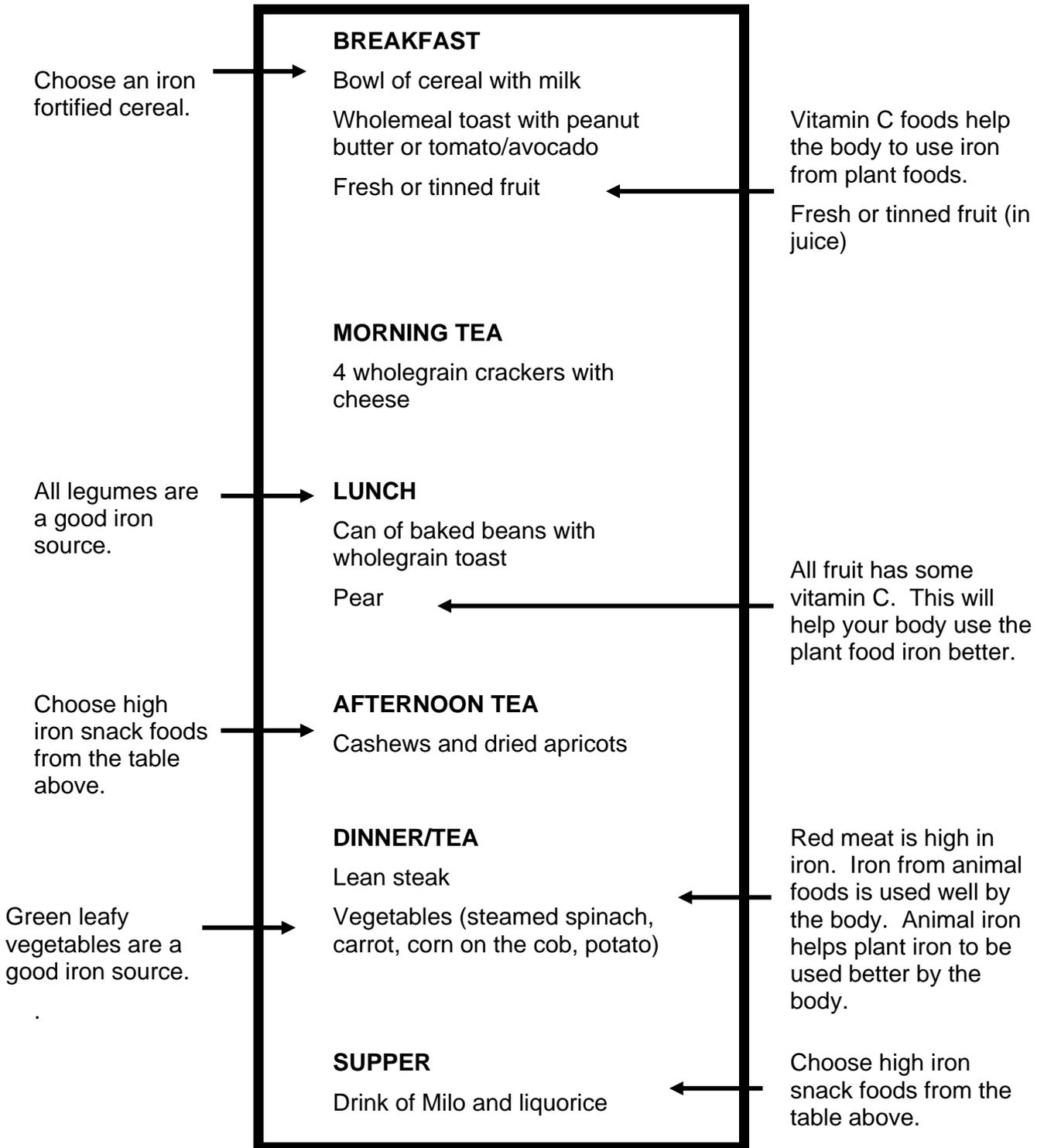
Wholegrain bread (1 slice)	0.63
Wholemeal bread (1 slice)	0.69
White bread (1 slice)	0.36
Brown rice (100 g)	0.5
Pasta (1 cup cooked)	0.6
Wholegrain cracker (4 crackers)	0.6
Vegetables	
½ cup cooked spinach	2.2
5 asparagus spears	1.0
½ cup green beans	1.0
3 slices beetroot	1.2
½ cup cooked silver beet	1.3
Potato (1 small)	0.5
½ cup green peas	0.9
Fruit	
Dried Apricots (8–10 apricot halves)	1.5
Prunes (5–6 prunes)	0.55
Sultanas (1 little box =37 g)	0.74
Fresh fruit (100 g)	0.2–0.7
Dairy foods	
Cheese (1 slice)	0.1
Milk (1 cup)	0.3
Snack foods and drinks	
Cashews (2–3 tablespoons = 50 g)	2.5
Pine nuts (50 g)	2
Pistachios (2–3 tablespoons = 50 g)	1.95
Almonds (50 g)	1.8
Milo (4 heaped teaspoons)	6
Peanut Butter (1 tablespoon)	0.5
Vegemite (1 tsp)	0.13
Liquorice (1 long strap = 50 g)	4.4



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





Iron blockers

Tea, coffee, unprocessed bran and various mineral, herbal and other medications can block plant iron being taken up by the body. Drinks rich in calcium such as milk block the absorption of iron in the gut. Avoid drinking tea, coffee and milk drinks with iron rich foods.

Iron tablets

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

- Eating more unprocessed plant foods like fruits with the skin on, vegetables, wholegrains, legumes
- Drinking more water
- Being physically active
- Taking your iron tablet every second day (discuss with doctor)

Things I can do to improve my diet for adequate iron intake

1.

2.

3.

For further information contact your Dietitian or Nutritionist: _____

References:

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

This is a consensus document from Dietitian/ Nutritionists from the Nutrition Education Materials Online, "NEMO", team.

Disclaimer: <http://www.health.qld.gov.au/masters/copyright.asp>

Reviewed: October 2015

Due for review: October 2017

What to do if your iron levels are low

- Check that you are eating animal sources of iron daily— remember the redder the better.
- Include wholegrain and iron fortified foods (e.g. breakfast cereals with added iron).
- Include vitamin C containing foods at meals (e.g. fruit, 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 soon after giving birth (usually for your 6 week post-natal check up). Low iron levels after pregnancy needs treatment to ensure adequate iron levels in breastfed babies.