

# Iron

Iron is an essential mineral needed for growth and development. Iron helps carry oxygen from the lungs to all parts of the body. It is necessary for energy production, muscle function, and supports a strong immune system. Since our body can't make iron, it's important to get enough from the foods we eat to keep everything working properly.

## Food sources of iron:

Iron can be found in a variety of foods, with two main types: **haem iron** and **non-haem iron**.

Haem iron is easily absorbed and found in animal-based foods such as red meat, fish and chicken. Non-haem iron, found in plant-based foods such as lentils, beans, spinach, and fortified cereals, isn't absorbed as easily.

New Zealand beef and lamb are high in iron and are two of the most commonly eaten sources in New Zealand. Eating a varied, balanced diet with up to 500g per week of cooked, lean red meat (which equals about 700 to 750g raw) is a great way to optimise iron intake. A balanced diet that includes both types of iron is essential for meeting daily iron needs.

Combining plant-based iron sources with foods rich in vitamin C, such as citrus fruits or capsicum, can enhance the absorption of non-haem iron.

## How much iron do I need?

The amount of iron required each day depends on gender, age and life stage. For instance, more iron is needed for women of reproductive age and during pregnancy.

Life Stage	Iron (mg/day)
Infants: 7 - 12 months	11
Children: 1 - 13 years	8 - 10
Boys: 14 - 18 years	11
Girls: 14 - 18 years	15
Women: 19 - 50	18
Pregnancy	27
Breastfeeding	9 - 10
Women: 50+ years	8
Men: 19+ years	8



## Who needs more iron?

**There are certain people who may be at a greater risk of iron deficiency such as:**

- Vegetarians, vegans, and individuals who exclude animal-sourced foods
- People who get their period
- Infants and young children
- People who are pregnant
- Athletes and very active individuals
- People who have had gastric surgery or with certain conditions such as Crohn's disease, coeliac disease or malabsorptive conditions
- People taking certain medications or calcium supplements

Nutrition changes to include more iron-rich foods and iron supplementation may be prescribed by a registered health professional to help prevent or correct deficiencies in these at-risk groups.

## What's on the menu for iron-rich eating?

### **Breakfast:**

2 eggs on 2 pieces of wholegrain toast (3.2 mg)

### **Morning tea:**

½ cup dried apricots, pumpkin seeds and cashews (2.7 mg)

### **Lunch:**

100g canned tuna with ½ cup edamame beans, brown rice, and salad (4.1 mg)

### **Afternoon tea:**

Smoothie with 1 banana, 1 cup spinach, ½ cup mango, 2 tsp chia seeds and 1 cup trim milk (2.2 mg)

### **Dinner:**

Lamb quinoa salad (6.4 mg)

Check out [recipes.co.nz](https://www.recipes.co.nz) for more delicious recipes.

For further tips to optimise your iron intake, see our [Top Tips for Iron Intake](#) resource.

## Signs of iron deficiency

**Common signs and symptoms of low iron include:**

- Fatigue and weakness
- Shortness of breath
- Irritability
- Sensitivity to cold temperatures
- Frequent illness and infections
- Difficulty concentrating

If you suspect your iron levels may be low, it is important to seek advice from a registered health professional.

Total iron  
in this menu  
**18.6mg**



Lean red meat can be described as nature's power pack; even a small serve has plenty of nutrients. It is high in iron, and an important part of a healthy balanced diet, alongside wholegrains, fruits, and vegetables.