



Iron during pregnancy

PREGNANCY: RESOURCES FOR PREGNANT MOM

ARTICLE

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During pregnancy, iron plays an important role. It is iron that transports oxygen to the cells. A pregnant woman needs more iron than before, but this is easy to achieve with a varied and balanced diet.

What is iron good for?

Iron contributes to the normal formation of red blood corpuscles and haemoglobin and helps to bring essential oxygen to your body cells and those of your baby. A maternal iron deficiency may affect the foetal development. Signs of iron deficiency in pregnancy include fatigue, headache, dizziness, and anaemia. Some women may feel cold and have hair loss problems.

The iron requirements of women are higher than those of men: 19mg/day instead of 6mg/day. They increase even more during pregnancy from 20mg/day during the first few months, to 30mg/day during the third trimester. With such a high demand of iron intake, it is very common that iron supplement is prescribed during pregnancy.

This is the reason why women who wish to fall pregnant are advised to ensure that they consume sufficient iron even before they fall pregnant.

On my plate...

Here's a list of common foods that are rich in iron:

- 1 bowl of brown rice = 1mg
- 1 cup of cornflakes = 3.6mg
- 1 palm-sized piece of lean beef = 2.8mg
- 1 palm-sized piece of lean pork = 1.2mg
- 1 fillet of fish = 1.2mg
- 2 tablespoons of ikan bilis = 0.6mg
- 1 small square of tofu = 1.9mg
- ½ cup of lentils = 7.2mg
- 1 cup of spinach = 1.5mg
- 1 cup of kang kong = 1.6mg
- ½ cup of kale = 1.3mg
- 10 dried figs = 3.6mg
- 10 dried dates = 3.3mg
- 1 fresh peach = 1.6mg

It is important to make a distinction between two types of iron:

- **Haemic iron**, which is found in meat, fish, etc. and is easily absorbed by the body (about 25%). Meat also contains organic compounds which promote the absorption of iron from other non-haemic iron sources.
- **Non-haemic iron**, which is found in cereals, legumes, fruit, vegetables and dairy products. This is far less well absorbed (only 1-5%).

To get sufficient iron, you are thus advised to eat healthy portions of meat (preferably red lean meat) and fish throughout your pregnancy.

Our practical suggestions

- Eat a portion of meat or fish for both lunch and dinner. It might be a good idea to choose legumes (beans, chickpeas, lentils, etc.) to go with meat.
- To boost iron absorption, consume some Vitamin C at the same meal: sprinkle lemon juice over your fish or have an orange for dessert.
- Avoid tea and coffee which contains tannins, substances that inhibit the absorption of iron, or drink your tea with a little lemon. Wait at least two hours after the meal before drinking tea and limit yourself to two cups a day.
- To maximise iron absorption, oral iron supplements should be eaten on an empty stomach 1 hour before meals.
- A food supplement may be prescribed if you are a vegetarian or vegan, but also if you are expecting twins or if your last pregnancy was very recent. Don't hesitate to discuss this with your doctor and possibly consult a dietician.