

The Importance of Iron



An iron-rich diet is essential for everyone, but especially so both before and during pregnancy when a woman's daily iron needs are higher than normal due to increased blood volume. The body uses iron to enable oxygen to be carried in the blood. When iron levels drop too low and oxygen carrying capacity is reduced, iron-deficiency anaemia can develop. Symptoms of anaemia include fatigue, weakness, pale skin, inflammation and soreness of the tongue, headaches, dizziness and shortness of breath. Iron is also required for a healthy placenta and a baby's cognitive

development. Levels are usually checked as part of a standard blood test, so if your levels are low your doctor might recommend a supplement. However, whether you need to take a supplement or not, it's important to be getting a good supply of iron in the diet.

Sources of Iron in the Diet

When it comes to our diet, iron is found in two forms; heme and non-heme iron. Heme iron is found only in animal sources, such as ***meat, fish and poultry*** and is more easily absorbed by the body. If going for meat or fish, do try and buy organic, grass-fed meat as this will have less added hormones which is important during pregnancy when hormones are in such flux.

It is possible to get enough iron in the diet even when vegetarian, as non-heme iron is found in a wide range of foods such as ***green leafy vegetables, broccoli, artichoke, asparagus, dried apricots, dates, pumpkin, sunflower and sesame seeds***. Grains such as ***brown rice and millet*** as well as other food sources, including ***chickpeas, lentils, kidney beans, quinoa, tofu and blackstrap molasses*** are great sources of iron. It is harder for the body to absorb non-heme iron, but one tip for increasing the amount of iron you absorb in your food is by ensuring you have a good dose of vitamin C with each meal. This should be covered if you are eating enough fruit and veg, but you can add a squeeze of fresh lemon juice to your salad dressings, and always make sure you include leafy greens whenever you have meat or fish. The greens contain iron themselves, but the vitamin C will help you get the most out of each meal.

Iron Supplements

If you have low iron levels and your doctor recommend you take iron supplements, you may want to avoid those that contain iron in the form of ferrous sulphate as this can cause gastrointestinal symptoms, including constipation. Ferrous sulphate supplements are common as they are extremely cheap, but you can find other supplements that contain iron bisglycinate or iron citrate that cost only a little more and are less likely to cause constipation whilst still giving you all the iron you need.



Iron-Boosting Recipes

Both lean beef and tofu are great sources of iron. When served with a leafy green salad containing spinach both meals become an excellent way to boost your intake. The tahini dressing gives an added source of iron, so feel free to use it as part of the hamburger meal as well - either as a salad dressing or as a dip for the burger.

Hamburger and Fresh Green Salad

Ingredients:

- 8oz/225g ground, lean beef
- 1 large bell pepper – finely sliced
- 2 tsp coconut oil
- Juice of 1 lemon
- 4 large garlic cloves, peeled, crushed and finely chopped
- ½ tsp sea salt
- Ground black pepper to taste
- 4 tbsp chopped parsley

Shape two hamburger patties from the ground beef. Heat the oil in a pan over a medium heat, and sauté the hamburgers on a low heat for 5 minutes on each side, or until cooked through. Remove and keep warm. Add the peppers, salt and pepper to the pan and sauté until browned, stirring in the lemon juice whilst cooking. Add the garlic and parsley, cooking for 3 more minutes. Serve with a large fresh salad.

Tofu Burgers with Green Salad and Tahini and Date Dressing

Ingredients:

- 2 lbs firm plain tofu
- 375ml water
- 2 tbsp tamari sauce
- 2 tbsp organic tomato sauce
- 2 tsp marmite or 4 tsp red miso paste
- 1 crushed clove garlic
- ½ tsp dried oregano
- A few leaves of fresh basil finely chopped



Slice tofu into thick slices and place in shallow container. Mix all the other ingredients together and pour over the tofu. Cover and let marinate for several hours. Bake in oven until brown, turning once, or cook on an oven grill. Serve with a large fresh green salad and mix with the tahini and date dressing.

Tahini and Date Dressing - Blend the following in a high-powered blender: ¼ cup tahini, 1 tbsp extra virgin olive oil or hemp oil, 1-2 cloves garlic, 1 Medjool date, a squeeze of lemon, salt and pepper and ½ cup water. This should serve 3-4 and keeps really well in the fridge for about 3 days.