What Is Meant By a Good Food Source?

A good source of iron contains 10-19 percent of the Daily Value (DV) for iron. A rich source of iron contains 20 percent of the DV or more. The DV for iron is 18 milligrams per day for adults and children over 4 years of age.

The Daily Value for iron is the amount of the mineral used as a standard in nutrition labeling of foods. Daily Values are based on the current Recommended Dietary Allowances (RDA). RDAs are set at levels that promote nutritional health. The RDA has been set at 15 milligrams per day for women 19 to 50 years of age and 10 milligrams for men 25 to 50 years of age.

Where Do Women Get Iron?

As you can see, 43 percent of the iron in the diets of women was contributed by grain products and 26 percent was supplied by meat, poultry, and fish. Foods that contain small amounts of iron but are not considered good sources can contribute significant amounts of iron to an individual's diet if these foods are eaten often or in large amounts.
**Why Do We Need Iron?**

Iron, a mineral, functions primarily as a carrier of oxygen in the body, both as a part of hemoglobin in the blood and of myoglobin in the muscles.

**Do We Get Enough Iron?**

According to recent USDA surveys, over three-fourths of American women 19 to 50 years of age had iron intakes below 80 percent of their RDA. Average iron intake was 67 percent of the RDA. Men of the same age met their RDA.

The ability of the body to absorb and utilize iron from different foods varies. The iron in meat, poultry, and fish is absorbed and utilized more readily than iron in other foods. The presence of these animal products in a meal increases the availability of iron from other foods. The presence of vitamin C (ascorbic acid) in a meal also increases iron absorption. The body increases or decreases iron absorption according to need. The body absorbs iron more efficiently when iron stores are low and during growth spurts or pregnancy. The most common indication of poor iron status is iron deficiency anemia, a condition in which the size and number of red blood cells are reduced. This condition may result from inadequate intake of iron or from blood loss.

**How Can We Get Enough Iron?**

Eating a variety of foods that contain iron is the best way to get an adequate amount. Healthy individuals who eat a balanced diet rarely need supplements. Intakes of iron tend to be low in relation to recommendations, and there aren't that many foods that are really good sources; thus, it may take special care to ensure an adequate intake. Many doctors recommend feeding a fortified milk formula or breakfast cereal or giving an iron supplement to infants and toddlers, because it is especially difficult to meet their iron needs. Doctors usually prescribe iron supplements for pregnant or lactating women.

**How To Prepare Foods To Retain Iron**

Iron is lost in cooking some foods even under the best conditions. To retain iron:
- Cook foods in a minimal amount of water.
- Cook for the shortest possible time.

**What About Enriched or Fortified Foods?**

Pasta, white rice, and most breads made from refined flours are enriched with iron, because iron is one of the nutrients lost in processing. Other nutrients added to refined flours and pasta are thiamin, niacin, and riboflavin. Enriched products or products made from enriched flour are labeled as such. Minimum and maximum enrichment levels are specified for thiamin, riboflavin, and niacin, but only a minimum level of iron is required in farina. Thus, iron enrichment levels for farina vary from brand to brand.

Most ready-to-eat and instant-prepared cereals are fortified with iron. Fortified ready-to-eat cereals usually contain at least 25 percent of the Daily Value for iron. Since cereals vary, check the label on the package for the percentage of the Daily Value for a specific cereal.

**What Are Some Sources?**

- Beef
- Liver: beef, calf, pork, chicken, turkey
- Shellfish
- Dry beans, peas, lentils
- Green leafy vegetables
- Raisins
- Dried apricots
- Iron-fortified breads and cereals.

Revised for use in Kentucky by Janet Kurzynske, Extension Food and Nutrition Specialist.

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