How to Increase Iron in Your Diet

Iron is a mineral that our bodies need for producing energy and for building red blood cells, which carry oxygen. Too little iron, or iron deficiency, can result in fatigue, weakness, poor exercise tolerance, loss of appetite and/or decreased ability to fight infection.

Only a fraction of the iron we eat is absorbed. If your doctor or Registered Dietitian has told you to increase the amount of iron in your diet, here are some guidelines, along with some tips to help increase absorption.

- **Increase consumption of heme iron.** Iron comes in 2 forms, heme and non-heme. Heme iron is the most easily absorbed form of iron. Good sources of heme iron are red meat, dark meat poultry (legs, thighs), liver, and fish. Remember the “MFP” factor: meat, fish, poultry. You will also absorb more non-heme iron if you eat these foods along with non-heme iron food sources.

- **Take vitamin C with your source of iron.** Vitamin C increases iron absorption. Four ounces (1/2 cup) of orange juice is enough to increase iron absorption. Other vitamin C containing juices/drinks can also be used. Other sources of vitamin C include citrus fruit, fresh bell peppers, strawberries, cantaloupe, and fresh broccoli.

- **Fruits, vegetables, nuts, grains, rice, egg yolks, and beans** contain non-heme iron, which is more difficult to absorb than heme iron. Include a source of vitamin C with these foods to maximize absorption.

- **Avoid drinking coffee, tea, or red wines with your meals or iron supplements if your doctor prescribed one.** Instead, enjoy these beverages between meals. These beverages contain tannins, polyphenols, and phytates which decrease the absorption of iron. Eating high-fiber foods or taking a calcium supplement during the same meal as an iron source can decrease iron absorption.

- **Choose a multivitamin that contains iron.** Be sure to read the label or check with your pharmacist, doctor, or Registered Dietitian about which type and amount of vitamin supplement is best for you.

- **Do not take iron supplements unless recommended by your doctor.** Too much iron can lead to health problems.

**Addition information about iron can be found at:**
- Vegetarian Resource Group: [http://www.vrg.org/nutrition/iron.htm](http://www.vrg.org/nutrition/iron.htm)