

Eat to Compete Iron and performance

Karen Armstrong RD

Everybody needs iron. You need iron to make hemoglobin, the part of the red blood cells that picks up oxygen from your lungs and carries it through the bloodstream to every cell in your body. When your iron stores get low you make less hemoglobin. This means your cells won't be getting as much oxygen as they need. You start feeling tired and weak. You can't train the way you'd like and your performance doesn't improve, or starts to get worse.

Anyone with poor eating habits is at risk for low iron stores, iron deficiency, and anemia. Youth, girls and women, vegetarians, and athletes also have a higher risk. Ask your doctor about checking your iron stores if you're feeling tired all the time.

How much iron do you need?

Age	Males	Females
9 - 13 years	8 milligrams	8 milligrams
14 - 18 years	11 milligrams	15 milligrams
19 - 50 years	8 milligrams	18 milligrams

Where can you find iron?

Choosing foods that contain iron is the best way to ensure you're getting a steady supply of this vital nutrient. Iron in food comes in two forms - heme iron which is easily absorbed by your body, and nonheme iron which needs some help to be absorbed. Heme iron is found in animal foods. Non heme iron comes from plant sources. Combine non heme foods with heme foods, or with foods high in Vitamin C so the iron can be better absorbed.

Some foods rich in heme iron

Red meats (beef, pork, bison, elk)
Dark poultry meat (thighs, drumsticks)

Some foods rich in nonheme iron

Dark green leafy veggies
Beans (eg baked beans, kidney beans, black beans)
Lentils
Firm tofu
Nuts and seeds (eg almonds, pumpkin seeds)
Iron enriched breads, cereals and pastas
Dried fruits (eg apricots, raisins prunes).

Some foods rich in Vitamin C

Oranges and grapefruits
Mangos
Kiwis
Red peppers

Should you take an iron supplement?

Not unless your doctor tells you to. If your doctor says you need a supplement, you'll be given instructions on how much and how often to take it.

Karen Armstrong is a Registered Dietitian with Manitoba Chicken Producers (www.chicken.mb.ca). She's an age group triathlete, masters swimmer, recreational skijorer and parent of a competitive swimmer. Look for more tips and information on eating to compete in upcoming issues of Coaches Clipboard. Karen can be reached at karmstrong@chicken.mb.ca.