



Iron is Important During Pregnancy

EXTENSION

April 2022

Deana Hildebrand, PhD, RD, LD
Professor & Extension Specialist

Christine Walters, MS, RDN
Dietetic Intern, Extension Program Assistant

Tori Compton
Dietetic Intern, Extension Program Assistant

Many women have low iron levels when they are pregnant. Signs of having low iron are feeling tired, weak, trouble focusing, poor appetite, gets sick easily, and having a pale color under your fingernails. Having too little iron can cause a condition called anemia. When you are pregnant you have more blood in your body. More blood means you need to get more iron from the food you eat. Iron carries oxygen to your body cells, and to your baby's body. The oxygen helps your cells make energy from the food you eat.

How does iron help the baby?

Iron is important for the baby's brain development before and after they are born. Getting enough iron during pregnancy is also important to your baby after he or she is born. In the last 3 months of pregnancy your baby is building up an iron store that will last 4 to 6 months after birth. The baby will use the stored iron until he or she is ready to start eating solid foods.

Which foods are good sources of iron?

Choosing foods that are good sources of iron is important. Foods high in iron include:

- Liver
- Lean red meats and chicken
- Sardines, anchovies, clams, and tuna
- Beans, peas, and lentils
- Enriched and whole-grain breads and cereals
- Dark-green leafy vegetables
- Dried fruits

Eating fruits and vegetables rich in vitamin C will help your body use more of the iron you eat.

Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Fact Sheets
are also available on our website at:
extension.okstate.edu

Should I take iron supplements?

If you begin your pregnancy without enough iron in your blood, it is often difficult to eat enough food to get the amount you need. Your doctor may recommend a prenatal supplement or an iron supplement. Iron supplements should only be taken under a doctor's care.

When taking iron supplements, be sure you drink enough fluid. Aim for about 8 cups a day. Choose beverages that do not contain caffeine. Too much caffeine will keep your body from absorbing the iron. Milk, calcium, antacids, and high fiber foods can also keep your body from absorbing iron. Be sure to wait 2 hours to take the iron supplement after eating these foods.

Tips for eating enough iron

- Read the ingredient list when buying breads and cereals - the first ingredient should be enriched or whole grain.
- Drink orange juice when eating oatmeal.
- Have peanut butter sandwiches on iron-enriched whole-grain bread and orange wedges for dessert.
- Add tomato slices and spinach leaves to meat sandwiches.
- Make a trail mix with peanuts, raisins, and whole-grain cereal. Have it with a glass of 100% fruit juice.
- Add tomato slices and fresh spinach leaves to meat sandwiches.
- Eat stews and soups made with beans, meat, and tomatoes such as chili or minestrone soup.
- Squeeze lemon on a chicken salad

The Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service

WE ARE OKLAHOMA

The Cooperative Extension Service is the largest, most successful informal educational organization in the world. It is a nationwide system funded and guided by a partnership of federal, state, and local governments that delivers information to help people help themselves through the land-grant university system.

Extension carries out programs in the broad categories of agriculture, natural resources and environment; family and consumer sciences; 4-H and other youth; and community resource development. Extension staff members live and work among the people they serve to help stimulate and educate Americans to plan ahead and cope with their problems.

Some characteristics of the Cooperative Extension system are:

- The federal, state, and local governments cooperatively share in its financial support and program direction.
 - It is administered by the land-grant university as designated by the state legislature through an Extension director.
 - Extension programs are nonpolitical, objective, and research-based information.
 - It provides practical, problem-oriented education for people of all ages. It is designated to take the knowledge of the university to those persons who do not or cannot participate in the formal classroom instruction of the university.
- It utilizes research from university, government, and other sources to help people make their own decisions.
 - More than a million volunteers help multiply the impact of the Extension professional staff.
 - It dispenses no funds to the public.
 - It is not a regulatory agency, but it does inform people of regulations and of their options in meeting them.
 - Local programs are developed and carried out in full recognition of national problems and goals.
 - The Extension staff educates people through personal contacts, meetings, demonstrations, and the mass media.
 - Extension has the built-in flexibility to adjust its programs and subject matter to meet new needs. Activities shift from year to year as citizen groups and Extension workers close to the problems advise changes.

References

Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. Eating right during pregnancy. April 2021. Available at <https://www.eatright.org/health/pregnancy/what-to-eat-when-expecting/eating-right-during-pregnancy>. Accessed June 2021.

The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. Nutrition during pregnancy. March 2021. Available at <https://www.acog.org/Patients/FAQs/Nutrition-During-Pregnancy?IsMobileSet=false>. Accessed June 2021.

Kennedy, T. (Fall 2018). Nutrition During Pregnancy [Slide 55] Nutritional Sciences Department, Oklahoma State University. Accessed June 2021.

U.S. National Library of Medicine. (2021, June 9). Taking iron supplements: MedlinePlus Medical Encyclopedia. MedlinePlus. <https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/007478.htm>. Accessed June 2021.

Oklahoma State University, as an equal opportunity employer, complies with all applicable federal and state laws regarding non-discrimination and affirmative action. Oklahoma State University is committed to a policy of equal opportunity for all individuals and does not discriminate based on race, religion, age, sex, color, national origin, marital status, sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, disability, or veteran status with regard to employment, educational programs and activities, and/or admissions. For more information, visit <https://eeo.okstate.edu>.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Director of Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma. This publication is printed and issued by Oklahoma State University as authorized by the Vice President for Agricultural Programs and has been prepared and distributed at a cost of 40 cents per copy. 04/2022 KG.