

IRON

by Delisa Renideo

I remember hearing TV advertising about “iron-poor blood” as a young child, and indeed, iron-deficiency anemia is a problem among many people around the world. But it is a problem that is widely misunderstood. (Anemia also has other causes besides dietary iron deficiency.)

Iron is needed for our bodies to make hemoglobin, the molecule in our blood which carries oxygen to all our cells. Without enough iron, we become tired easily because our blood is not carrying enough oxygen, which is necessary for our body to

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burn glucose, our preferred energy source. On the other hand, we don't want to have too much iron (iron overload), which may contribute to both cancer

and heart attack. So, as in most things, more is not always better.

One very common misunderstanding is that we need to eat red meat in order to get enough iron. This is not true. Vegans, people who eat no animal products at all, are no more at risk for iron-deficiency anemia than omnivores.

There are 2 types of iron: heme iron and non-heme iron. Heme iron is found only in animal products. Non-heme iron is found in both plants and animals. Both

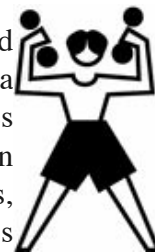
forms of iron can be utilized by our bodies, but there is a difference in how our bodies absorb them. Non-heme iron is absorbed at varying rates, depending upon our body's need for it. Heme iron, on the other hand, is absorbed at a fairly constant rate regardless of our need for it, which can be a problem.

Consuming foods containing vitamin C increases our absorption of non-heme iron, so eating fruits and vegetables enhances iron absorption. Dairy products and eggs interfere with non-heme iron absorption, so drinking milk with a meal actually prevents the absorption of the iron.

Non-heme iron is abundant in green vegetables, beans, and fortified grains. So eating a bowl of lentil soup, a slice of whole grain bread, and a green leafy salad is a perfect way to get iron in sufficient amounts. Your body will absorb greater amounts of this iron if its iron stores are getting low, and will absorb much less if its needs are

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less. This is a very good thing as it prevents us from experiencing iron overload. Our body is smart! It knows how



much iron we need and will just take what we need of non-heme iron.

Getting much of our iron from meat, on the other hand, means we will absorb about 23% of the iron whether we need it or not. Our body's intelligence is overpowered by the automatic absorption of heme iron. This can place us at risk for iron overload and the health problems associated with it.

So, if we eat a plant-based diet rich in green vegetables, fruits, grains, and beans, and avoid dairy products, we'll get plenty of iron along with the vitamin C which enhances absorption. And getting our iron from plants allows the wisdom of our bodies to take just what we need.

(Source: NutritionMD.org)