Helping Your Child Eat More Iron Rich Foods

What is iron?
Iron is a very important mineral found in food. There are two types of iron.
- **Haem iron** comes from animal foods and is easily absorbed.
- **Non-haem iron** comes from plant foods. The amount of non-haem iron your child absorbs depends on what else they eat with it.

Why is iron important?
If your child has low levels of iron in their blood (sometimes called anaemia), they may feel tired or faint, and lack energy to learn and play.

Why does my child have low iron levels?
Your child may be:
- not eating enough iron e.g. an unbalanced or vegetarian diet
- losing more iron e.g. starting periods
- needing more iron e.g. growth spurts
- not absorbing enough iron e.g. coeliac disease

Where is iron found in food?

**Excellent sources of iron (haem)**
Give your child 1 portion per week:
- Liver* or other offal (e.g. kidney, heart, black pudding, faggots)

**Very good sources of iron (haem and non-haem)**
Give your child 1-2 portions per day:
- Red meat – beef, lamb, pork and duck
- Corned beef
- Sardines, mackerel, pilchards, tuna
- Fortified breakfast cereal (choose those with over 8mg per 100g)

**Good non-meat sources of iron (non-haem)**
Give your child 2 portions a day (3 portions if your child does not eat meat):
- Bread and bread products (particularly wholemeal versions) e.g. oat cakes, crisp breads, crackers, pitta bread.
- Vegetables especially green and leafy vegetables – peas, broccoli, curly kale, spinach, spring greens, leeks, spring onions, watercress.
- Dried fruit - figs, dates, prunes, raisins, sultanas, apricots.
- Nuts and seeds - cashews, peanuts, pistachios, almonds, walnuts, brazils, sesame seeds (avoid whole or chopped nuts and seeds and choose nut butters or tahini if your child is under 5).

Try chicken liver pate in a sandwich or on toast if your child is not keen on offal.

*Avoid liver and liver products in pregnancy. The high vitamin A content may harm the baby.
■ Pulses – broad beans, butter beans, chick peas, kidney beans, lentils.

■ Eggs scrambled, boiled, poached or egg mayonnaise sandwich.

■ Baked beans in tomato sauce.

■ Meat replacements – vegetarian sausages and burgers, tofu, soya mince.

How can I help my child absorb iron from their food?

Vitamin C rich foods and drinks increase the amount of non-haem iron you can absorb from your food.

Vitamin C rich foods and drinks include fruit juices (orange, apple, cranberry, guava, mango or grapefruit) or fruit smoothies (no more than 150mls per day), vitamin C enriched cordials (sugar free), red and green peppers and green leafy vegetables.

Top tips to improve your child’s iron intake

1. Have vitamin C rich foods and drinks with meals containing non-haem iron.

2. Hot drinks like tea, coffee and cocoa contain substances that reduce the absorption of iron from food. Only drink these about an hour after eating and between meals.

3. Bran also reduces the absorption of iron from food. We do not recommend adding bran to children’s food.

4. Do not give an infant under 1 year of age cow’s milk as a main drink, as it does not contain enough iron. For children over 1 year, if they drink more than a pint of cow’s milk a day (600mls), they will not have an appetite for iron-rich solid foods.

Where to go for more information

■ British Dietetic Association Food Facts – www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts

■ Vegetarian Society – www.vegsoc.org

■ NHS Choices – www.nhs.uk

■ British Nutrition Foundation – www.nutrition.org.uk

Written information cannot replace personalised recommendations. For further advice please seek a dietetic referral from your consultant or GP.

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