Women and Iron

All about Iron
Iron is an essential mineral. It is needed to make healthy red blood cells which are cells that carry oxygen around our body and give us energy. Women are at risk of having low body stores of iron because of menstruation and not eating enough iron rich foods to replace the losses. A recent large survey suggested that 42% of Irish women could be at risk of iron deficiency!

During pregnancy women's iron needs are higher, if you are pregnant and wish to increase your iron intake, check out our factsheet on planning a pregnancy.

What happens if I don’t eat enough Iron?
Poor dietary iron intake can cause symptoms such as tiredness, irritability, headaches and decreased immune function. The human body tries to increase iron absorption when stores are low, but if no iron is available through diet or supplementation you might develop iron deficiency anaemia.

The final stage of iron deficiency anaemia is the exhaustion of the body’s iron stores. Your doctor can check your iron stores by a blood test and recommend a supplement if needed.

Iron can be divided into two types, depending on the way in which it is absorbed.

1. **Haem Iron**
   Haem Iron is a type of iron that is easily used by the body. It is important to include haem iron in your diet because of this. Foods which include this type of iron are liver, beef, lamb, pork, chicken and oily fish such as salmon and sardines.

2. **Non Haem Iron**
   Non haem iron is another type of iron, but only about 5-15% of this iron is absorbed by the body. It is found mainly in non-meat foods such as fortified breakfast cereals, bread, broccoli, cabbage, peas, beans, lentils, eggs and nuts.

   Eating foods which contain vitamin C at the same time as eating non haem iron helps in its absorption. Vitamin C can be found in berries, fruit juices, vegetables and salads. For example, eating an egg dish or breakfast cereal with fruit juice can maximise non haem iron absorption from the egg or breakfast cereal.
Remember also that non haem iron is sensitive to compounds found in tea, coffee, cocoa and red wine, so try not to drink these at the same time as eating these foods. These drinks can reduce your body’s ability to absorb the iron.

Foods rich in phytates (found in legumes and whole grains) can also decrease absorption of non haem iron.

Iron rich meal ideas
So if you are ready to boost your iron intake, try out some of the meals below throughout your week.

- Scrambled egg with mushrooms, grilled tomato and fruit juice
- Fortified breakfast cereal, berries and fruit juice
- Sardines with wholegrain toast and green salad
- Omelette with chopped peppers and mushrooms
- Spaghetti Bolognaise with grilled tomato and garlic ciabatta
- Spiced beef/pork strip stir-fry with noodles, baby corn and mangetout.

*Created by Laura McNamara MINDI, December 2015. Review date: December 2018.*

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