Julie Stewart Nutrition

THE LOW DOWN ON IRON

Iron deficiency is the most frequent nutritional deficiency in the world, and the main nutritional deficiency in Europe. It can affect anyone, no matter the diet at any age.

At the same time, millions of people absorb so much iron that it threatens their health: Iron exemplifies the golden rule in nutrition: **» not too little, but not too much either.**

Iron is a mineral that our bodies need for many functions. For example, iron is part of haemoglobin, a protein in blood cells that carries oxygen from our lungs throughout our bodies. It helps our muscles store and use oxygen.

Iron requirements are higher than normal in relation to body weight during childhood and teenage years, also higher for menstruating women who lose a lot of blood, or in pregnancy.

CAN I GET ENOUGH IRON ON A VEGAN DIET?

Yes, you can!

A balanced vegan diet, containing regular intake of iron-rich plant foods will, for most healthy people, contain all the iron we need.

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There are many plant foods that are rich in iron, so intake in vegans is usually high.

And it's a better kind of iron!

The iron we get from plants (non-haem) is absorbed in a different way to iron from animal sources, and the body cleverly regulates how much iron from plants it absorbs and stores – any excess is eliminated.

Whereas iron from animal foods (haem iron) is instantly absorbed but not so readily balanced by the body - we'll store any excess. This can be a problem because **too much iron can be toxic** – and in the case of infections, bacteria, viruses and parasites thrive on iron in the body, so balancing the amounts we store is helpful – remember not too much, not too little.

HOW MUCH IRON DO I NEED?

Look at the RNI's below to see how needs vary at different stages. Most people need not worry about counting exactly how many milligrams of iron they are taking in each day. Simply include a regular intake of iron-rich pant foods (and there are many!) and you'll be doing just fine.

Iron rich plant foods to include:		
Lentils	Pumpkin seeds	Quinoa
Dark green leafy vegetables	Dried apricots and dates	Figs
Tofu	Asparagus	Desiccated coconut
70%+ dark chocolate	Mushrooms	Beans & peas

INCLUDE IRON RICH FOODS AND YOU'LL BE REACHING YOUR DAILY TARGET:

1 cup cooked lentils = 6.6mg iron

28g (1oz) pumpkins seeds = 4.2mg iron

1 cup cooked quinoa = 2.8mg iron

1 cup cooked broccoli =1mg iron

2 slices wholemeal bread =1.5mg iron

100g of dates = 4.79 mg iron

100g of dried apricots = 2.66mg iron

½ cup cooked spinach = 3mg iron (cooking high oxalate green leafy veggies lowers the oxalate content for improved absorption)

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Remember: Vitamin C increases the absorption of iron whereas tea and coffee reduce the absorption.

UK Reference Nutrient Intakes	
Age	**(mg/day)**
0-3 months	1.7
4-6 months	4.3
7-12 months	7.8
1-3 years	6.9
4-6 years	6.1
7-10 years	8.7
Males 11-14 years	11.3
Males 15-18 years	11.3
Males 19-50+ years	8.7
Females 11-14 years	14.8
Females 15-50+ years	14.8
(Geissler and Powers 2005; FSA 2007)	

WHAT IF I'M LOW ON IRON?

Anaemia occurs when your blood doesn't have enough red blood cells. This can happen if your body doesn't make enough red blood cells. Your GP or healthcare professional needs to diagnose low levels via a blood test and will usually prescribe an iron supplement.

SYMPTOMS OF IRON DEFICIENCY:

- tiredness
- feeling cold
- shortness of breath
- pallor – pale skin
- inability to concentrate.

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If you have been tested and you have found you're low on iron, there could be many factors influencing this, from your digestion to blood loss or illness. This is where working with a nutritionist is a great way to look at the root cause of why you may not be absorbing iron, and work on improving that.

There are some dietary factors to be aware of that bind with non-haem iron, decreasing its absorption:

- Phytates – found in dried grains, beans, and legumes.
- Oxalates – found in some green leafy veg, beetroots, nuts.
- Polyphenols (effect is reduced in the presence of vitamin C)
- Calcium also affects haem-iron absorption when above a 50mg serving
- Tannic acid in tea and coffee
- Soy protein also has an inhibitory effect on absorption.
- Eggs for non-vegans – the 'egg factor' can reduce absorption close to 30%

So, the rate of iron absorption can be influenced by the other foods you are eating alongside your iron rich foods, but many of these foods are healthy so don't stop eating them!

It's best not to get too hung up on this, and just be rest assured that nature knows exactly what it was doing when it designed plants in the perfect package for us to eat!

WAYS TO INCREASE ABSORPTION OF IRON FROM PLANT FOODS

- Combining fruits and vegetables rich in vitamin C with iron rich foods in the same meal is the best way to increase iron absorption.
- Avoid drinking tea or coffee with a meal and for 2 hours either side of meals. (Herbal teas are fine).
- Soaking dried grains, beans, and legumes overnight in water will reduce their phytate content to enhance iron absorption.
- Steaming or cooking green leafy veg will reduce oxalates.

SHOULD I SUPPLEMENT?

Iron supplementation is not recommended unless blood testing is carried out first. Many off the shelf multi-vitamins contain iron – so be careful about taking these long term; if you don't particularly have a higher need for iron, then supplementing may be doing more harm than good!

Most professional grade multi-nutrients, especially for men, don't contain iron for this reason.

Some supplements can be quite difficult for people to tolerate, with gastrointestinal side effects being the most common. Symptoms include nausea, constipation,

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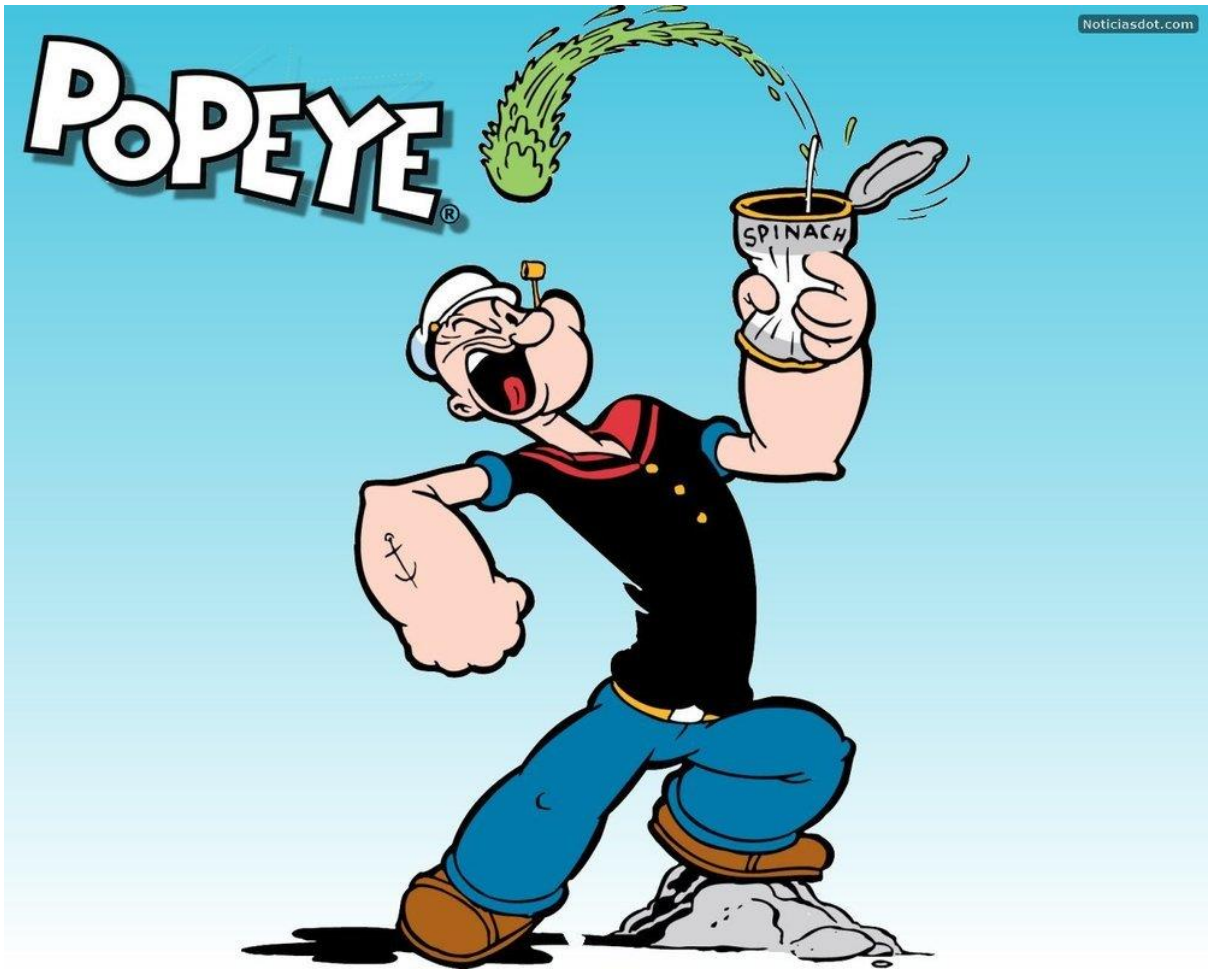
heartburn, vomiting, and diarrhoea. In addition, stools may appear darker in colour. Talk to your nutritionist or health professional about gentler forms of iron that are easier to take and often better absorbed.

LIVING PROOF

Every time I go to the blood bank to donate my blood, they take that little finger prick blood sample and drop it into a test tube. I watch it literally drop like a lead balloon in the clear fluid – this tells them that I have plenty of iron and there are no problems with giving blood. I have been vegan for many years and never supplement with iron.

Those of us of a certain age will remember the cartoon character Popeye from our childhood, I love how he got his superpower strength. Do you remember how he used to gulp down a can of cooked spinach and all his muscles would pop up?!

I reckon that was the iron!



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