Iron for Your Toddler & Young Child

Why is iron important?
Iron is part of good nutrition. Toddlers’ and young children’s brains rely on iron to develop structures that last a lifetime. Their bodies need iron to grow, to have energy for playing, learning, and relationships, and to resist colds and infections.

What happens if my child doesn’t get enough iron?
Iron deficiency is the most common nutritional deficiency in children. A toddler/child without enough iron might be pale, have dark circles under their eyes, have a poor appetite, get sick more often, or be tired, weak, cranky, fussy, anxious, clingy, or depressed. Their mental and physical skills may even be affected.

How can I make sure my child gets enough iron?
There is plenty of iron in the foods listed on the back of this page. A child can get all the iron they need from these foods. For more information, see the BC HealthFiles on iron, iron foods, and helping toddlers eat well. Iron pills/drops can be harmful - do not give your child iron pills or drops unless a doctor prescribes them. Keep them out of reach from your child(ren).

Is your child getting enough iron?

My child:

- Is offered meat, chicken, or fish at least once a day, most days of the week
- Is offered beans, tofu, eggs or nuts and seeds when served a meatless meal
- Is offered whole grains and cereals every day
- Is offered vegetables or fruit (Vitamin C foods) at meal and snack times
- Drinks no more than 750 mL of milk each day
- Drinks no more than 250 mL of juice each day
- Eats dinner with the rest of the family
- Doesn’t drink coffee, black or green tea

If you ticked all of the above, you are doing well. If a box was missed see the reverse of this handout for more iron-rich food ideas.

10 Iron Foods Kids Love!

- Fortified dry cereals
- Peanut butter & banana slices on whole wheat bread
- Burritos (beef, refried beans, cheese & tomatoes wrapped in a flour tortilla)
- Mild chili with beef & beans/lentils
- Gingerbread molasses cookies
- Pork & beans
- Hamburgers made with lean beef
- Dried apricots (serve in iron-fortified cereal or oatmeal, or as a cookie ingredient)
- Split pea soup & enriched crackers
- Meatball sandwiches

Cooking in cast iron pans can add a little iron to stir-fries, pasta sauces, omelets, etc.
Animal sources of iron (offer 1-2 child-sized servings most days)
1 toddler/child-sized cooked serving = 40-75 mL or grams
Beef, pork, lamb, veal, turkey*
Clams, mussels, shrimp
Chicken
Fish
Egg yolk** (1 egg)

*Meats can be hard for young children to chew. Keep them moist & tender; serve them in stews, soups & casseroles. Slice very thinly for sandwiches or finger foods.
**Cook eggs well. Iron in egg yolk is not absorbed well. Combine with vitamin C foods. See below.

Plant sources of iron* (offer 4 to 6 child-sized servings each day)
1 child-sized serving = 60-125 mL or ½ - 1 slice (unless specified)
Instant enriched oatmeal, cream of wheat
Iron fortified cereals
Beans, tofu, lentils, split peas
Pumpkin, squash, or sesame seeds (15-30 mL)
Blackstrap molasses (7-15 mL)
Sunflower seeds, roasted soybeans, or nuts (45-60 mL)
Prune juice
Dried apricots, prunes, figs, and raisins (45-60 mL)
Dark green vegetables (broccoli, peas, spinach, bok choy, leafy greens)
Enriched grains (pasta, breads, bagels)
Whole grain foods (brown rice, oats, barley, quinoa, amaranth)
Wheat germ (15-30 mL)
Ovaltine™ (125-250 mL prepared)

*The iron from plant sources is absorbed and used better when you eat meat with them and/or when you eat Vitamin C foods with them.

Some foods rich in Vitamin C are:
☆ Tomatoes – add tomato slices to your sandwich or salad, or serve them on the side
☆ Broccoli - serve raw with a little dressing for dip, or serve cooked with a little butter for flavour
☆ Cantaloupe or orange wedges can garnish the plate or be served as dessert
☆ Peppers (red, green, orange, yellow) - slice into salads, or lightly stir fry with a little rice vinegar
☆ Papaya, mango, kiwi, strawberries, blueberries, raspberries, apple – most fruits have vitamin C
☆ Sweet potato fries – slice into sticks, toss with a little canola oil, and bake at 450°F for 20 minutes
☆ Any 100% fruit juice - limit to no more than 125 - 250 mL per day

When to ask for help...
Call Dietitian Services if your child:
• Does not eat any meat and/or eats very few of the iron-rich foods listed
• Is vegetarian
• Doesn’t regularly eat dinner with the family
• Is a picky eater, especially with iron-foods
• Is constipated
• Drinks too much milk (more than 750 mL a day) or too much juice (more than 250 mL a day)
• Has multiple food allergies

Dietitian Services at HealthLink BC:
Dial 8-1-1
http://www.healthlinkbc.ca/dietitian/