

[IMAGE]

Why You Need Iron

By Editorial Staff

The most common element on the planet, iron is found in much of the Earth's outer and inner core. It also plays an important role in the human body. Here's why.

Although iron is considered a minor (trace) mineral, meaning the body requires less than 100 milligrams per day (the recommended daily allowance of iron for adult males ages 19-50 is only 8 mg; for women in the same age group, it's 18 mg), that doesn't mean we can take it for granted. After all, iron participates in such functions as metabolism, DNA synthesis, growth, healing, immune function and reproduction. Iron is also found in the blood in two proteins (hemoglobin and myoglobin) that transport oxygen through the blood and muscles, making iron an important contributor to athletic performance. (Try running a mile with your blood and muscles getting inadequate oxygen; you won't get far.)

iron pill - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark As you might expect, one of the hallmark symptoms of iron deficiency is fatigue. Again, if your blood, muscles, etc., aren't getting enough oxygen, you're going to be tired – very tired. Other common symptoms attributable to inadequate iron intake include pallor (pale skin), brittle or grooved nails, hair loss, irritability and weakness. Those most at risk for iron deficiency anemia are women who have heavy periods, are pregnant or have just had a baby; long-distance runners, vegetarians, people who frequently donate blood, and people with health issues that negatively impact nutrient absorption (Crohn's or celiac disease, other gastrointestinal conditions). According to estimates, approximately 20 percent of women, 50 percent of pregnant women and 3 percent of men lack adequate iron.

Iron is present in a substantial number of foods, so deficiency shouldn't generally be an issue – and yet it can be because of the above considerations and because of poor dietary habits that don't provide enough iron (or many of the other minerals and vitamins essential to good health). The best food sources of iron include dried beans, dried fruits, eggs (especially egg yolks), lean red meat (especially beef), oysters, poultry (dark red meat), salmon, tuna, and whole grains. Iron from animal sources is absorbed more efficiently than iron from plant sources, so it's best to combine both to optimize absorption. It's also possible to get *too much* iron, so never take an iron supplement without first consulting your doctor.

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