

Iron: Essential Info for Plant-Based Eaters

Did you know that iron is the most common nutrient deficiency in North America? (1) Although much fewer people ask about iron than protein and calcium, plant-based people should definitely invest the time to know the deets on this essential mineral, for a few key reasons:

1. Plant and meat based irons are not the same.
2. The recommended daily intake of iron is higher for vegetarians.
3. There are some simple steps you can take to increase your absorption of iron.

Iron is found in every cell of the human body, and is required for your blood to be able to transport oxygen from the lungs to the rest of your body (2). Sounds pretty important, right? Indeed.

A deficiency in iron - known as anemia - can lead to dizziness, headaches, low energy, and shortness of breath (3). According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the people most at risk of deficiency are pregnant women, menstruating women, infants and toddlers, and (you guessed it) people who don't eat meat or fish. (4)

Now that you know how incredibly important iron is for your optimal health, let's get to the good stuff and discuss how you can make sure you're getting enough of it.

1. Plant and meat based irons are not the same.

There are essentially two types of iron: heme iron and non heme iron. Heme iron is found in meat, and is much more readily absorbed by your body. Non heme iron is found in plant-based foods, and is not as easy for your body to digest and assimilate (5).

2. The recommended intake of iron is higher for vegetarians

Because of the whole heme/non heme issue, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recommends that people who do not eat meat consume 1.8 times as much iron as meat eaters (6).

However, Jack Norris, Registered Dietician and writer for VeganHealth.org, pointed out that this recommendation is not based on actual research of vegetarians, but simply because plants have less available iron. There is no research that indicates that vegetarians have a higher incidence of anemia than meat eaters.

He concludes that a varied plant-based diet eaten by a healthy person should supply ample iron. (7) Generally speaking, a focus on whole grains, nuts, leafy greens, potatoes, and soy will provide you with plenty of iron (8), and if you are concerned, read on because we're going to discuss increasing absorption next.

3. There are some simple steps you can take to increase your absorption of iron.

You know that plant-based (non heme) iron is less “bio-available” than meat-based iron. So clearly, it’s really important that you do what you can to ensure that your body is prepared to assimilate as much of that plant-based iron as possible. Here are four things you can do to help ensure that you are absorbing iron efficiently (9):

- a. Add a source of vitamin C at meals (10)
- b. Avoid coffee and tea at meals
- c. Increase your legume intake
- d. Cook your foods in cast iron skillet

As long as you are eating lots of the above foods, and abiding by the tips to increase absorption, anemia shouldn’t be a problem for you. However, if you do notice that you’re experiencing any of the symptoms listed above, you should definitely go and get some blood work done. It’s always a good idea - especially eating all plant-based foods - to get an annual physical just to make sure everything is how it should be.

Plus, regular check-ups with your doctor will show them real life evidence of just how healthy you can be on a purely plant-based diet!

- 1: <http://www.nomeatathlete.com/iron-for-vegetarians/>
2. <https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/002422.htm>
3. <https://www.nlm.nih.gov/health/health-topics/topics/ida/signs>
4. <https://www.nlm.nih.gov/health/health-topics/topics/ida/atrisk>
5. <http://www.vrg.org/nutrition/iron.php>
6. <https://ods.od.nih.gov/factsheets/Iron-HealthProfessional/>
7. <http://www.veganhealth.org/articles/iron>
8. <https://www.vegansociety.com/resources/nutrition-and-health/vitamins-minerals-and-nutrients/iron>
9. <http://www.veganhealth.org/articles/iron>
10. <http://www.globalhealingcenter.com/natural-health/foods-high-in-vitamin-c/>