



You can get enough iron without meat

Our adult daughter has low iron. I think it's because she doesn't eat meat, but she says that there's plenty of iron in other foods. Can you help me persuade her she's wrong?

Although meat is a good source of iron — particularly heme iron, the kind that's more easily absorbed in the body — your daughter should be able to get plenty of the mineral without eating meat. She just needs to be a bit more vigilant.

Heme iron is the type of iron found in meat. It comes from hemoglobin (the iron-containing part of the red blood cell) and myoglobin (a compound in muscle tissue). Close to half of the iron in red meat is heme iron. Usually, between 15 percent to 35 percent of heme iron in food is absorbed by the body.

The other type of iron is called "nonheme iron." It's actually much more common in the diet, making up about 85 percent to 90 percent of the iron we consume. It's found in fortified breakfast cereals, beans (including soybeans, white beans, kidney beans, lima beans, navy beans, black beans and refried beans), lentils, spinach, chickpeas, prune juice, tomato puree and tomato paste. Unfortunately, only 2 percent to 20 percent of non-heme iron is usually absorbed. But vitamin C increases the absorption of nonheme iron, so your daughter will help herself by eating vitamin C-rich foods along with iron-containing foods. Foods high in

vitamin C include sweet red and green peppers, peaches, papayas, broccoli, tomato products, strawberries, potatoes, cantaloupe, and, of course, citrus fruits and juices.

On the other hand, some foods decrease absorption of nonheme iron. Polyphenols, phytates, calcium and other substances in tea, coffee, whole grains, legumes and milk or dairy products can decrease the amount of iron absorbed at a meal. Since your daughter is already experiencing low iron, it's worth knowing. Low stomach acid can also decrease iron absorption.

If she hasn't already, your daughter may want to discuss with her doctor the advantage of taking an iron supplement. There are two types available: ferrous and ferric. Ferrous is more easily absorbed, particularly ferrous fumarate.

Though rare, it's possible to get too much iron. Children are particularly at risk; they could die if they ingest 200 milligrams of iron at once. Any iron supplements should be tightly capped and kept away from children's reach at all times.

Low iron is one of the most common nutrient deficiencies in the nation and in the world. Women of childbearing age need 18 milligrams a day; adult men and women after menopause need 8 milligrams a day. Pregnant women should get 27 milligrams a day.

Chow Line is a service of Ohio State University Extension and the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center. Send questions to Chow Line, c/o Martha Filipic, 2021 Coffey Road, Columbus, OH, 43210-1044, or filipic.3@cfaes.osu.edu.



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