

What can I do to boost my iron levels?

You should eat a well balanced diet. A healthy, iron-enriched diet is important for all donors, other than those with Haemochromatosis.

Due to monthly blood losses, women need more dietary iron than men. Although iron is found in many foods, some sources of iron are better absorbed by the body than others.

The iron in red meat is absorbed up to seven times more easily than the iron in vegetables, cereals, fruits and nuts.

Good sources of iron include:

- Lean red meat (beef, pork, lamb)
- Chicken & turkey, particularly the dark meat
- Oily fish – including mackerel, sardines, salmon and shellfish
- Eggs
- Breakfast cereals fortified with iron
- Pulses & beans, canned baked beans, chickpeas and lentils
- Nuts, including peanut butter
- Wholegrains, including brown rice
- Tofu
- Bread, especially wholemeal or brown bread
- Leafy green vegetables, curly kale, broccoli, spinach
- Dried fruit, particularly apricots, raisins and prunes

If you are a vegetarian, or your diet does not contain meat or fish, extra care is needed to ensure it isn't lacking in iron. A well planned vegetarian diet should include iron-rich foods such as those mentioned in the above list.

Vitamin C helps the body to absorb more iron so to get the most from the food that you eat, have vitamin C rich foods with meals, e.g. a fruit juice drink with your breakfast cereal or green vegetables with meat.

Avoid drinking tea, coffee or cocoa just before, with or immediately after meals as this may reduce the absorption of iron from foods.

For further information visit www.bordbia.ie

Do I need to take iron tablets?

You should not take iron tablets unless advised to do so by your GP or other doctor. If you have been prescribed iron because of iron deficiency we recommend that you do not donate blood for at least 12 months after you started taking iron. This is to allow time for your iron stores to recover. Please note that we will not accept a donation from you while you are on iron tablets.

What if my Hb is too high?

There are many possible reasons for having a Hb level above normal. Some healthy individuals will naturally have a slightly higher level than normal.

Other reasons include:

- Dehydration
- Smoking
- Heart or lung disease
- Bone marrow problems
- Kidney disease

We advise donors with a raised Hb level to consult their GP for further tests to rule out any problems.

Haemoglobin & Iron Frequently Asked Questions

What is Haemoglobin?

Haemoglobin, or 'Hb', is a protein that contains iron and is found in red blood cells. It carries oxygen around the body and gives blood its red colour.

Haemoglobin levels vary from person to person and men usually have higher levels than women. Hb levels are often lower in the summer months. Each time you come to donate your haemoglobin level is checked.

The minimum Hb levels needed to give blood are 12.5 g/dl in women and 13.5 g/dl in men.

Why is my Hb measured before each donation?

The health of our donors and recipients is a priority.

The Hb test is performed to ensure that it is safe for you to donate blood and also that there is enough Hb in the donation for the person receiving your blood. This test is a screening test using a drop of blood from your finger, i.e. capillary blood. It is a reliable test but it is not as accurate as a test done using blood from a vein, i.e. venous blood, and sometimes the capillary test may under or over-estimate your Hb. If your capillary Hb is above or below the level for donation we will do a second test using venous blood. You can donate today if your venous Hb is within the acceptable range.

Red cells (containing Hb) are removed when you give blood, causing a temporary drop in your Hb level. The minimum Hb levels needed before giving blood take into consideration the expected drop in Hb.

When can I donate again?

Unfortunately as you did not pass the Hb test you are not eligible to donate today. We will advise you when you can return to donate.

What causes low Hb?

There are a number of possible reasons, including:

- Normal variation – for some individuals a slightly low Hb level is normal and not the result of any health problem
- Lack of iron which is required to make new red cells
- A deficiency in vitamin B12 or folate
- Conditions causing blood loss, including blood donation
- Other health problems

Iron deficiency is a common cause of low Hb

What is IRON and where do I get it from?

Iron is a mineral nutrient that your body needs to function normally. It is a vital part of haemoglobin.

Your body obtains iron from your diet. Iron is mainly used for making new red cells. The remaining iron is stored and used at times when there is an increased need for iron such as with growth, in pregnancy or blood loss. The term iron deficiency is used when these stores have been used up.

Is it possible to have normal haemoglobin but low iron?

Yes. This is because in early iron deficiency there is often enough iron circulating in your red cells to keep your Hb level normal.

What are the effects of low iron levels?

Iron deficiency does not always cause symptoms. In some individuals it may be associated with tiredness, impaired concentration or poor work performance. If you feel you may be low in iron, you should consult your GP.

Continued iron loss will affect the production of Hb. If Hb levels fall below the normal range, this is called anaemia.

Who is at risk of iron deficiency?

The chance of developing iron deficiency is higher in donors who:

- Have low iron stores before donation – stores are generally lower in women of child-bearing age and young donors
- Have a diet low in iron
- Have medical conditions or surgery which reduce the amount of iron the body can absorb
- Have non-donation related blood loss
- Make frequent donations over a long period

Iron deficiency may be the result of more than one cause.