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5 Practical Ways to Increase Iron in Your Baby's Diet

by Alice Callahan on August 31, 2011

I mentioned in my last post ([Does My Baby Get Enough Iron?](#)) that I have been worrying about my 9-month-old's iron nutrition. Iron deficiency can cause lasting delays and deficits in cognitive and behavioral development, and I don't want to go there.

First, let's consider if your baby is actually at risk for iron deficiency, because why fret about something that isn't a problem? You have enough to worry about.

If your baby is less than 6 months of age, he probably has enough iron. Babies are usually born with sufficient iron stores to last them for about the first 4-6 months of life. There are some exceptions: If your baby was born preterm or small for his age or if you have diabetes, he may have been born with lower iron stores, in which case your pediatrician will usually prescribe iron drops for your baby. In addition to the iron your little one is using from his iron stores, he will also get some iron from breast milk or formula during the first six months. Breast milk doesn't contain much iron (see my post [Why Is Breast Milk So Low in Iron?](#)), but infants are very efficient at absorbing it. If your baby is drinking iron-fortified formula, he is getting lots of additional iron. There are some "low iron" formulas on the market, so make sure yours is not one of them.

Around 6 months of age, the iron stores are depleted, and your 6- to 12-month-old baby needs to be consuming about **11 mg of iron per day**. A formula-fed baby will continue to get lots of iron from formula, in addition to complementary foods. However, **if your baby is 6 months or older, mainly breastfed, and doesn't eat at least two servings of fortified baby cereal or meat per day, he could be at risk for iron deficiency.** Toddlers (1-3 years) need 7 mg of iron per day. Toddlers don't require as much iron as babies, because toddlers don't grow quite as fast. **If your toddler is consuming cow's milk and not much in the way of iron-rich foods, he could still be at risk for iron deficiency.**

At 9 months old, my BabyC falls into the "at-risk" category. She is breast-fed, doesn't like the baby cereals, and only eats a little bit of meat, so I set about trying to find other ways to sneak iron into her diet. Here is what I found:



5 ways to increase iron in your baby's diet:

1. Love your fortified cereals! BabyC won't have anything to do with baby cereals (and I've tried several varieties), but she will eat some regular fortified oatmeal. This doesn't have as much iron as baby cereals, but it still gives her a nice dose. Cream of Wheat and Malt-O-Meal are also good options. Look for cereals that state in the Nutrition Facts label that they provide at least 45% of the daily value for iron. Note that if the cereal is not made specifically for babies, this refers to the adult requirement and an adult-sized serving, but it is still an indicator that the cereal is fortified. If your baby will eat dry cereals, such as Cheerios, these are usually fortified as well. Unfortunately, many of the "natural" cereal brands are not fortified, so double-check the labels again for that 45% of daily value. **[For lots more discussion of infant cereals, see my post: [The Whole Truth About Infant Cereals: 7 Science-Based Tips.](#)]**

2. Cook with fortified cereals. I have made some delicious pancakes for BabyC using all of the many varieties of baby cereal that she has refused to eat the conventional way. I used [this recipe](#) found at [wholesomebabyfood.com](#). The recipe makes about 24, 2-inch pancakes, and when you tally up the iron sources (baby cereal, flour, egg yolks), you end up with 1.25 mg iron per pancake. Use water in the recipe instead of milk to avoid the inhibiting effect of dairy on iron absorption. BabyC can easily eat 3-4 of these at breakfast (especially if they have blueberries!), and at that rate she's already met almost half of her iron requirement. I make a big batch and then freeze them in baggies of 3-4 so it is easy to pull out a serving to thaw. I'm exploring other recipes that will turn fortified cereals into finger foods. Next up is Malt-o-Meal muffins! Also, consider mixing some baby cereal into savory foods like meatballs.

3. Include a source of vitamin C. Several studies have shown that including vitamin C in a baby's meal can at least double the absorption of iron from cereals and legumes. I give BabyC Tri-Vi-Sol drops (or a generic version) at breakfast, which contain 35 mg of vitamin C. Other baby-friendly sources of vitamin C include citrus, strawberries, cantaloupe, kiwifruit, raspberries, broccoli, bell peppers, and potatoes. BabyC loves those little Clementine oranges, and each of these contains about 36 mg of vitamin C. Pair a good source of vitamin C with meals containing cereals and beans to maximize the iron your baby absorbs from those foods.

4. Limit dairy with meals. The calcium in cow's milk inhibits iron absorption, so avoid feeding dairy with high-iron meals. Instead, feed cheese and yogurt as a between-meal snack. BabyC loves cheese, and the calcium is good for her, but separating it from a meal means that it is less likely to interfere with her iron absorption. And above all, don't give your baby cow's milk before age 1 – stick with either breast milk or an iron-fortified formula.

5. Introduce a variety of iron-rich foods, including grains, meats, beans, and veggies. I know that BabyC isn't going to get all of her iron from cereal, so I make sure that she has opportunities to eat a variety of iron sources throughout the day. And remember that you may have to offer a food to your baby 5 or 6 times before he'll really eat it, so keep trying.

The table below will give you some good ideas of iron-rich foods that you can incorporate into your baby's diet. Pay attention to the serving size in the table, and remember that all of the food sources of iron need to add up to 11 mg of iron per day for a 6- to 12-month-old baby or 7 mg for a 1- to 3-year-old toddler foods?

Finger-Food-Friendly Sources of Iron

(all values are for cooked foods, except for preprepared foods like Cheerios and bread)

| | Serving size | Iron per serving (mg) |
|-----------------------|---------------------|------------------------------|
| Animal Sources | | |
| Chicken liver | 1 oz | 3.32 |
| Beef liver | 1 oz | 1.76 |
| Sardines | 1 oz | 0.83 |
| Ground beef | 1 oz | 0.55 |
| Egg yolk | 1 large (17 g) | 0.46 |
| Chicken thigh | 1 oz | 0.38 |
| Chicken breast | 1 oz | 0.29 |
| Grains | | |
| Baby cereal | 5 Tbs | 5.95 |
| Fortified oatmeal | 5 Tbs | 3.66 |
| Cheerios | 1/4 cup (7 g) | 2.23 |
| Amaranth | 1/4 cup | 1.29 |
| Quinoa | 1/4 cup | 0.69 |
| Barley | 1/4 cup | 0.52 |
| Pasta | 1/4 cup | 0.45 |
| Wheat germ | 1 Tbs | 0.45 |
| Whole wheat bread | 1/2 slice | 0.43 |
| Legumes | | |
| White beans | 1/4 cup | 1.66 |
| Lentils | 1/4 cup | 1.65 |
| Kidney beans | 1/4 cup | 1.30 |
| Black beans | 1/4 cup | 0.90 |
| Chick peas | 1/4 cup | 0.90 |
| Tofu | 1/4 cup | 0.67 |
| Vegetables | | |
| Spinach | 1/4 cup | 1.61 |
| Green peas | 1/4 cup | 0.61 |
| Kale | 1/4 cup | 0.29 |
| Broccoli | 1/4 cup | 0.26 |
| Green beans | 1/4 cup | 0.22 |

Values in this table were adapted from the [USDA National Nutrient Database](#).

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