

Iron-Rich Foods for Babies Quick-Reference Card

Iron is the most critical nutrient for infant brain development — know the best sources and how much your baby needs

Babies are born with iron stores from pregnancy that begin running out around 4–6 months. After that, they need 11 mg/day of iron — more per pound of body weight than at any other life stage. Iron deficiency in infancy causes cognitive delays that may not be fully reversible even with later supplementation.

Why Iron Matters for Baby Brains

DAILY NEED (7-12 MO)

11 mg/day

DAILY NEED (1-3 YR)

7 mg/day

BRAIN ROLE

Myelination, neurotransmitter synthesis, energy metabolism

DEFICIENCY RISK

Lower IQ, impaired motor skills, behavioral problems

Best Heme Iron Sources (Animal — Best Absorbed)

FOOD	SERVING (BABY)	IRON (MG)	ABSORPTION RATE	PREP TIPS
Chicken liver	1 Tbsp pureed	1.8 mg	~25%	Saute in butter, puree smooth. Highest iron per bite.
Beef liver	1 Tbsp pureed	1.6 mg	~25%	Soak in milk 1 hr before cooking to mellow flavor.
Ground beef (lean)	2 Tbsp	1.2 mg	~20%	Cook, mince fine or puree with broth.
Dark turkey meat	2 Tbsp	1.0 mg	~20%	Shred finely, moisten with broth.
Lamb (ground)	2 Tbsp	1.1 mg	~20%	Mild flavor most babies accept well.
Egg yolk	1 yolk	0.9 mg	~15%	Hard-boil, mash with breastmilk or avocado.

FOOD	SERVING (BABY)	IRON (MG)	ABSORPTION RATE	PREP TIPS
Salmon	2 Tbsp	0.5 mg	~15%	Bonus: high DHA. Flake and check for bones.
Sardines (canned)	1 Tbsp mashed	0.7 mg	~15%	In water, mash well. Calcium bonus from bones.

Best Non-Heme Iron Sources (Plant)

FOOD	SERVING (BABY)	IRON (MG)	ABSORPTION RATE	BOOST ABSORPTION
Lentils (cooked)	2 Tbsp	1.3 mg	~5-8%	Serve with vitamin C (tomato, bell pepper puree)
Black beans (cooked)	2 Tbsp	0.9 mg	~5-8%	Mash well; pair with citrus or strawberry
Chickpeas (cooked)	2 Tbsp	1.0 mg	~5-8%	Make into smooth hummus with lemon juice
Tofu (firm)	2 Tbsp cubed	1.1 mg	~5-8%	Pan-fry in strips for self-feeding
Oatmeal (fortified)	3 Tbsp cooked	3.5 mg	~3-5%	Mix with mashed strawberries or kiwi
Spinach (cooked)	1 Tbsp	0.8 mg	~2-5%	High oxalates reduce absorption; pair with vitamin C
Prune puree	2 Tbsp	0.5 mg	~5%	Also helps with constipation from iron-rich diet
Hemp seeds	1 tsp	0.7 mg	~5-8%	Sprinkle on purees; also protein and omega-3

Iron Absorption Boosters & Blockers

Increases Absorption

- ✓ Vitamin C foods: strawberry, bell pepper, tomato, kiwi, citrus, broccoli
- ✓ Heme iron (meat) eaten alongside plant iron
- ✓ Cooking in cast iron (leaches small amounts of iron)

Decreases Absorption

- ✗ Cow's milk or calcium supplements at same meal
- ✗ Tea or coffee (tannins) — not relevant for babies, but for nursing mothers
- ✗ High-phytate foods: unsoaked grains, bran

✓ Fermenting or soaking grains/legumes (reduces phytates)

✗ Egg whites (ovotransferrin binds iron — serve yolk separately when possible)

DAILY IRON STRATEGY

Aim for 2–3 iron-rich foods per day. One serving of meat or liver plus one serving of beans with vitamin C covers most of the daily 11 mg need. Don't rely on fortified cereals alone — heme iron from meat is absorbed 4–5 times more efficiently than plant iron.

IMPORTANT

Signs of iron deficiency: pale skin (especially inside lower eyelid), fatigue/low energy, poor appetite, slow weight gain, frequent infections, pica (eating non-food items). If you suspect deficiency, ask your pediatrician for a CBC and ferritin test — don't just supplement without testing.