

Iron

Iron in the body

Iron is used by the body to carry around oxygen. Iron is in haemoglobin. Haemoglobin is in red blood cells.

Haemoglobin (Hb) levels may sometimes be too low in your blood if you do not have enough iron.

Having low iron levels may make you feel weary, have poor concentration and a higher risk of infection.

Iron in food

There are two types of iron in food: Iron from animal foods (called haem iron) and iron from plant foods (called non haem iron).

Haem iron is taken up by the body about 10 times better than non-haem iron. It is nature's iron tablet. Meats are the best source of iron. The redder the meat, the higher it is in iron. This means beef, lamb & kangaroo are higher in iron than pork, chicken or fish. Coloured flesh fish, such as tuna and mullet, are higher in iron than reef fish, such as barramundi.

Non-haem iron is found in some plant foods such as:

- ❖ wholegrain and iron fortified breads and cereals foods eg. a breakfast cereal with added iron
- ❖ legumes eg. kidney beans
- ❖ green leafy vegetables eg. spinach and broccoli
- ❖ nuts and dried fruit

Remember that iron from these foods is not taken up by the body as well as iron from animal foods. You will need to eat more of these foods if they are your only iron source.

To increase how much iron the body takes up from plant foods, eat foods high in vitamin C, like fruits and vegetables, or foods containing haem iron (from an animal) at the same meal.

Iron blockers

Tea, coffee, unprocessed bran and various mineral, herbal and other medications can block plant iron being taken up by the body.

What to do if your iron levels are low

- ❖ check that you are regularly including animal sources of iron – remember the redder the better
- ❖ include wholegrain and iron fortified foods eg breakfast cereals with added iron
- ❖ include vitamin C foods at meals eg orange juice
- ❖ check to make sure you limit the iron blockers
- ❖ after you have tried these hints, if your iron is still low, talk to your doctor about taking iron tablets

Iron tablets

Iron tablets should only be taken when a blood test has confirmed that your levels are low. People may experience constipation from taking iron tablets. You can manage constipation is naturally by:

- ❖ eating more unprocessed plant foods like fruits with the skin on, vegetables, wholegrains and legumes
- ❖ drinking more water
- ❖ being physically active

How much iron do you need?

Men	8mg/day
Women (19-50)	18mg/day
Women (51+)	8mg/day

Requirements vary during pregnancy and lactation – refer to the NEMO resource 'Iron for Pregnant Women'.

How much iron is in food?

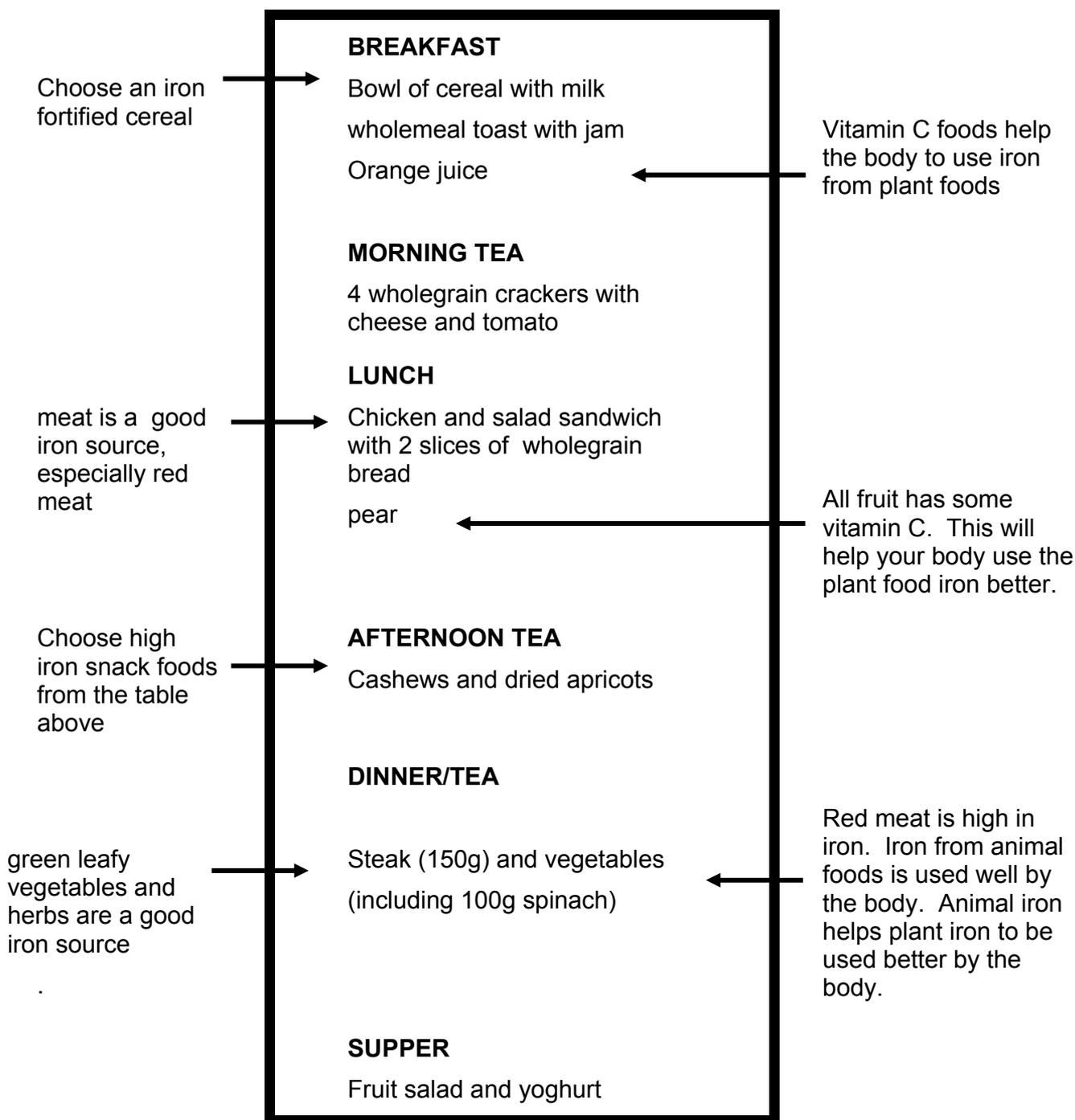
Food (serving size)	Iron (mg)
Meat and meat alternatives	
Black pudding (100g) - cooked	17
Liver (100g)	6.5
Lean beef (100g)	3.1
Lean Lamb (100g)	2.5
Chicken (100g)	0.9
Lean Pork (100g)	1.4
Tuna (100g or one small can)	1.0
Sardines (120g or one reg tin)	3.24
Egg (1 egg= 55g)	1.1
Snapper (100g)	0.3
Kidney beans (1/2 cup)	2.1
Baked beans (1 small can = 140g)	2.24
3 bean mix (1/2 cup)	2.0
Miso (100g)	0.2
Tofu (2 large squares = 100g)	5.2

Bread and Cereal Foods	
Iron fortified breakfast cereal (1 bowl or 2 biscuits = 30g)	3
Non-fortified breakfast cereal (1 bowl or 2 biscuits = 30g)	1
Wholegrain bread (1 slice)	0.63
Wholemeal bread (1 slice)	0.69
White bread (1 slice)	0.36
Brown rice (100g)	0.5
Wholegrain cracker (4 crackers)	0.6
Vegetables	
Spinach (100g)	3.0
Silverbeet (100g)	2.2
Parsley (1 small bunch = 50g)	4.9
Mushrooms (100g)	0.2
Snack foods and drinks	
Cashews (2-3 tablespoons = 50g)	2.5
Pistachios (2-3 tablespoons = 50g)	1.95
Dried Apricots (8-10 apricot halves)	1.5
Prunes (5-6 prunes)	0.55
Sultanas (1 little box =37g)	0.74
Milo (4 heaped teaspoons)	6
Vegemite (1 tsp)	0.13
Liquorice (1 long strap = 50g)	4.4
Guinness	0.0

How would I plan to eat that much iron in a day?

This meal plan is an example of how you could eat **18mg** of iron in a day for **women aged 19-50**.

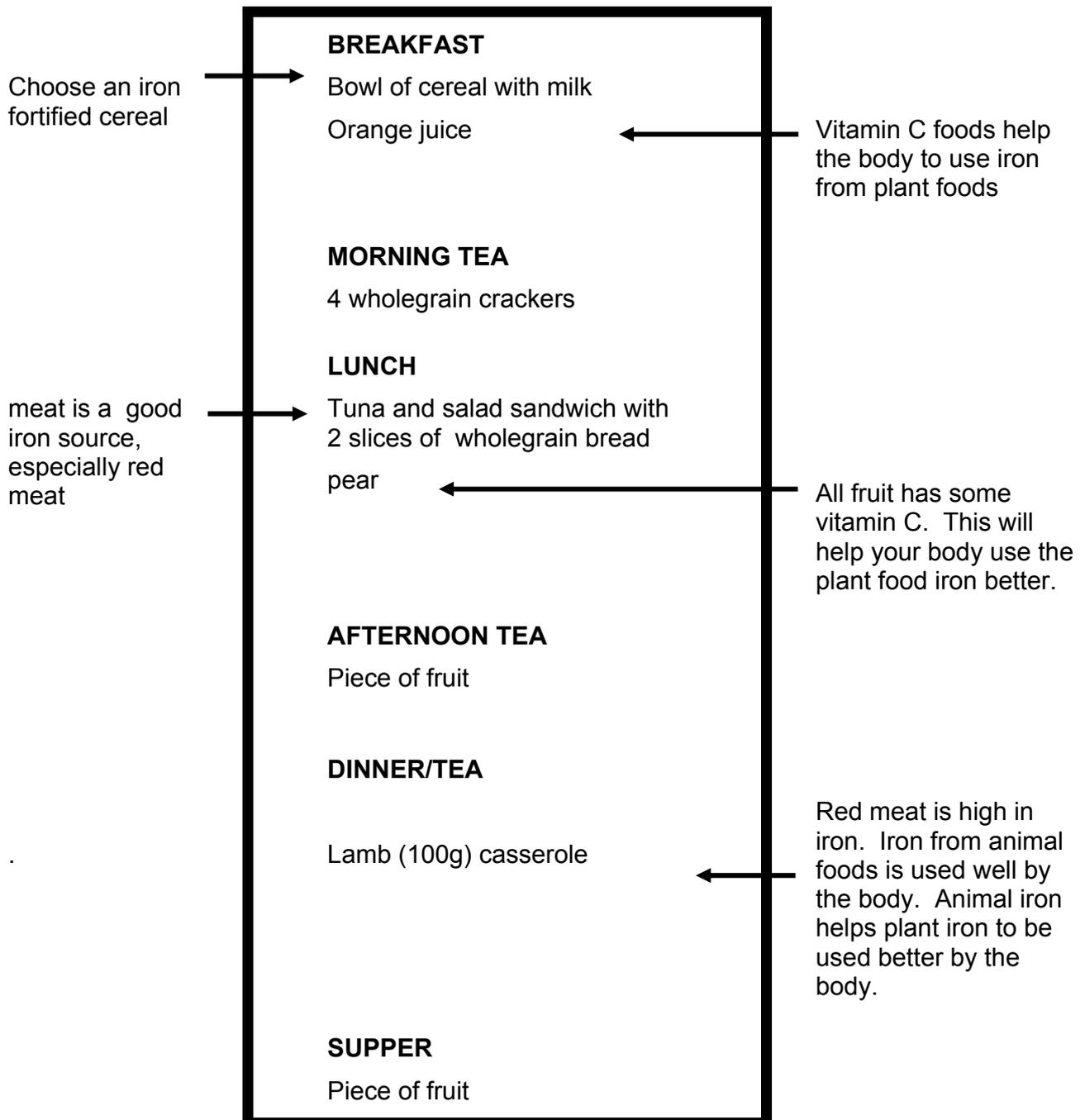
SAMPLE MEAL PLAN



How would I plan to eat that much iron in a day?

This meal plan is an example of how you could eat **8mg** of iron in a day for all **men and women aged 51 and over**.

SAMPLE MEAL PLAN



References:

- Nutritional Value of Australian Foods. Australian New Zealand Food Authority. (1991). Commonwealth of Australia
- Nutrient Reference Values for Australia and New Zealand. National Health and Medical Research Council. (2006) Commonwealth of Australia.
- Nutrition Education Materials Online. Iron for pregnant women. Available @ www.health.qld.gov.au/nutrition