



“Ironic” Balance

Iron is considered an essential nutrient. Without iron, many of the chemical reactions in the body that sustain life are not possible. This includes the transport of oxygen from your lungs to all of your body through red blood cells. Iron can be found in high concentration in red blood cells, and gives them their bright red color when they are fully laden with oxygen. Without iron, red blood cell production in the bone marrow comes to a stand still and anemia develops. Lack of iron in the diet, may result in a life threatening drop in red blood cells.

Normally, our bodies have a self-control mechanism by which we can absorb more iron when our reserves are depleted, and less so when our iron store is plentiful. In most cases, this can maintain the delicate balance between too little iron for our needs, and avoiding the accumulation of toxic levels of it. For iron can build up to extreme levels when the regulating mechanism is defective, a condition known as hemochromatosis. Large amounts of iron can build up in the liver and heart, causing diabetes, liver and heart failure. Individuals affected by this condition should restrict iron in their diets.

If, on the contrary, you need to build up your iron reserves so that you are able to donate blood, here are some tips:

- Cook with iron cookware, iron filings can get into food from cast iron skillets and some grills
- Eat red meat, meats such as beef, lamb and venison contain high amounts of the type of iron most easily absorbed by the body
- Take vitamin C at mealtime, ascorbic acid increases the absorption of iron
- Avoid drinking tea, coffee, or dairy with the main meal, these inhibit the absorption of iron
- Drink alcohol in moderation with your meals, alcohol increases the absorption of iron
- Over the counter vitamins with iron supplements are also useful

If your iron levels do not increase, consult your physician who will evaluate the possibility of unnoticed bleed (from your digestive track or other sources), or lack of iron absorption.

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Florida Blood Services is an independent, not for profit, community based healthcare provider for the blood needs of patients at medical facilities throughout the Tampa Bay area. Over 800 volunteer donations are required daily. For further information or donation locations, call 1-800-68-BLOOD (25663) or visit www.fbsblood.org.