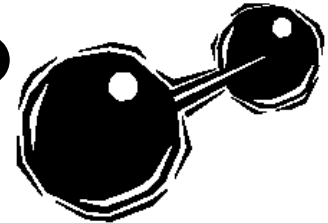




YOUR NUTRITION GAME PLAN



Iron: There's More To It Than Pumping It



Consider yourself healthy and strong? Most athletes are. But to stay that way, you have to do more than just pump iron. You have to make sure you're getting iron in your diet. Chances are, you or someone on your team is not getting enough iron. Estimates are that up to 25% of all teenage girls have iron deficiency. But it's not just a female problem. Growing guys are at risk too.

Why is Iron Important?

Not getting enough iron can turn even the strongest athlete into a weakling. What's more, iron deficiency also hurts your mental performance.

How Does Iron Affect my Performance?

Iron's main job is carrying oxygen in your blood. It's in a molecule called hemoglobin, which gives your blood its bright red color. Hemoglobin is like a magnet for oxygen, taking it from your lungs and releasing it to your muscles, brain and other tissues. When iron is in short supply, you make less hemoglobin, so you don't get as much oxygen. Your muscle and brain functions go downhill in a hurry without enough oxygen. Think of the last time you were out of breath and panting for air. Lacking iron is like having your tissues gasp for air and not getting what they need.

Besides delivering oxygen, iron has other jobs. Iron-containing enzymes unleash energy in your muscles. In other words, that lunch you ate can't be turned into energy for your muscles unless you have enough iron in your body.

What Happens if I Don't Have Enough Iron?

Having less iron in the body than you should is called iron deficiency. Iron deficiency can lead to the more severe stage called anemia. Athletes who are anemic experience decreased physical performance, headaches and insomnia. They often feel tired, cold, weak, dizzy and short of breath, and they look pale. Learning can also suffer. This can show up as lower test grades.

Millions of Americans battle iron deficiency, but it is totally preventable—just make sure you get enough iron.

How Do I Know if I'm Getting Enough Iron?

The only way to know if you have an iron deficiency is with a blood test your doctor or health clinic can run. But you can take preventive measures against iron deficiency by eating a diet with adequate iron. Many athletes eat diets low in iron. In fact, estimates are that 40% of Americans don't get enough iron. Females need about 15 mg/day of iron and males need 10-12 mg/day. The table shows iron content and availability of various foods.

Two Kinds of Iron

How much iron your body absorbs depends on the food. Foods like meat, fish and poultry contain the kind of iron called heme, as in hemoglobin, as in the kind in your body. It is absorbed much better than the non-heme iron (not from hemoglobin) in bread, cereal, fruits, vegetables and pasta.

For example, referring to the table, a 3 ounce portion of ground beef has about the same total iron as a bagel, but your body gets three times more iron from the hamburger.

Some Foods Help Your Body Absorb Iron

Non-heme iron can be absorbed better by eating it with vitamin C-rich foods. Foods high in vitamin C include orange juice, tomatoes, grapefruit and melons.

Some Foods Inhibit Iron Absorption

Certain substances in food decrease how much iron gets absorbed from your intestine into your body. For example, tannins in tea and polyphenols in coffee inhibit absorption of iron when these beverages are consumed with a meal. Even though many vegetables and whole grains are loaded with iron, the phytates, oxalates and fiber in these foods block much of the iron from getting into your body.

If you aren't getting enough iron, adding iron-rich foods to your diet can help prevent problems of iron deficiency. Whether you're eating it or pumping it, iron helps you perform your best.

continued on page two