IRON- Are you getting enough?

Everyone needs a regular intake of iron. Most of this iron is used to make haemoglobin, the oxygen-carrying part of red blood cells. When there is too little haemoglobin, less oxygen gets into the body cells.¹

Iron deficiency anaemia can cause: ²
- Decreased memory and concentration
- Fatigue
- Adverse pregnancy outcomes for mother and baby
- Infant development delay (both motor and mental function)

During pregnancy your baby draws enough iron from you to last through the first 5 to 6 months after birth, so it’s vital that you consume more iron while pregnant.

Some people need more iron than others and are at risk of anaemia:
- Pregnant women
- Menstruating women (especially heavy loss)
- Vegetarians and vegans
- People who have had gastric surgery eg banding
- People with Inflammatory bowel disease eg coeliac disease
- Athletes (elite level)

SOURCES OF IRON
Food provides iron in two forms: haem and non-haem. Haem iron is present in animal meat and is absorbed 4-5 times more easily than non-haem iron.² The redder the meat, the higher the iron content.

Non-haem iron is present in plant foods. The absorption of non-haem rich foods is three times greater when taken with haem iron foods.

Sources of Haem-rich Iron
- Lamb, beef, veal, liver, kidney, pork
- Chicken, eggs and fish such as salmon

Sources of Non-Haem Iron (plant based)
Legumes: lima beans, kidney beans, lentils, chickpeas, baked beans, tofu
Cereals and Bread: Iron- fortified breakfast cereals and wholegrain bread

Vegetables: Leafy green vegetables- especially spinach and broccoli
Others: Dried apricots, almonds, seeds eg sunflower, sesame, pumpkin, tahini, Milo, Ovaltine, Cocoa

HANDY HINTS FOR AN IRON RICH DIET
1. Try to include foods high in iron at each meal.
2. Try to consume red meat 3-4 times per week or include large amounts of plant based foods high in non-haem iron.
3. Include wholegrain and iron fortified foods e.g. breakfast cereals with added iron.
4. Combine non-haem sources of iron with vitamin C rich foods (berries, kiwi fruit, oranges, orange juice, tomatoes, capsicum, broccoli and green leafy vegetables) to maximise absorption.
5. Some components of food and fluid can reduce the absorption of iron. Drink tea, coffee, and milk between your meals.
6. If taking calcium supplements, consume between meals and separately from iron supplements.

TABLETS- IRON SUPPLEMENTS
Sometime it is difficult to get all the iron you need from food and you may need to take an iron supplement. Not all iron tablets contain enough iron to treat low iron levels. Iron tablets with the right amount of iron include Ferrogradumet, Ferrograd-C, Ferro-f-tabs, Fetol and FGF.⁴

Iron tablets are better absorbed if taken on an empty stomach (1 hour before or 2 hours after a meal) if possible with juice or water.⁴ Remember to keep tablets out of reach of children.

Side effects of taking iron tablets can include nausea, upset stomach, constipation or diarrhoea. It is normal for iron tablets to make your stool/faeces turn black.⁴ If your iron level does not improve and significant anaemia is present, intravenous (IV) iron through a drip may be needed. Your doctor or midwife will talk to you about this.

References.
¹ NSW Health Having a baby booklet. www.health.nsw.gov.au
³ Food Safety during Pregnancy. NSW Food Authority, 2010