

Information for Health Professionals

DIETARY AWARENESS

Although women, especially older women, can sometimes be more proactive than men in taking care of their health, and there is increasing interest in diet and health across the board, some dietary messages can get confused. A survey by online resource www.meatandhealth.com (2010) found that almost half of women believed spinach to be the best source of iron. In fact, you would need to eat a large amount of spinach to get the same amount of iron as there is in a portion of lean red meat.

Three quarters of the women surveyed did not know the Reference Nutrient Intake (RNI) for iron (14.8mg/day for females aged 11-50 years, falling to 8.7mg for women over 50 years). The vast majority of women (90%) did not know the difference between haem and non-haem iron. Haem iron, found in red meat, is more readily absorbed by the human body than non-haem iron, found in some plant-based foods (such as watercress, nuts, beans and some dried fruits). Vitamin C and haem-iron both help the body absorb non-haem iron. Therefore, eating foods which are a source of vitamin C (such as red peppers or small glass of orange juice) or haem-iron (such as red meat) at mealtimes can help the absorption of iron from non-meat sources. On the other hand, tea, coffee and high fibre cereals reduce iron absorption from non-meat sources.

RED MEAT & WOMEN

Women generally require fewer calories (energy) than men and tend to eat smaller quantities of food, particularly if they are attempting to lose weight. As a consequence their intake of some important nutrients, compared with men, can be smaller. This makes women's food selection extremely important if they are to ensure adequate intakes of vital micronutrients. Eating nutrient dense foods, such as lean red meat, fruits and vegetables, pulses, lower fat dairy foods and wholegrain starchy carbohydrates, can help to ensure that intakes of essential nutrients are optimal.

Women's Nutrient Requirements

Despite a generally lower food intake, women's requirements for vitamins and minerals and trace elements are fairly similar to those of men. Adolescent girls and pre-menopausal women actually require more iron than men due to menstrual losses. Women also have an increased need for micronutrients such as folate, zinc and vitamin B12 as a result of pregnancy and lactation. Women can, therefore, be more vulnerable to poor nutrient intakes than men. Adolescent girls can be particularly vulnerable to low nutrient intakes, due to poor dietary choices such as skipping breakfast or following faddy diets.

Weight Loss

As well as being nutrient dense, lean red meat is a good source of protein. Foods high in protein appear to increase feelings of fullness more than foods high in fat or carbohydrate. Including foods high in protein within a calorie-controlled diet, may help some people to curb their feelings of hunger and make it more likely that they will be able to adhere to a weight loss or weight maintenance diet.

Top Tips for Increasing Iron Intake

- Use extra-lean mince to make lasagne, spaghetti Bolognese, meatballs, cottage pie and homemade burgers. A dinner of spaghetti Bolognese with whole-wheat pasta will provide around 6.6mg iron – that's 47% of the RNI – while a burger in a wholemeal bap with salad provides 5.4mg of iron, and a plate of cottage pie, contains 3.7mg iron.
- When selecting meat perhaps bear in mind that, in general, the darker the flesh, the higher the iron content. This means beef contains more iron than lamb and pork. Leg meat in poultry is generally higher in iron than breast meat, which in turn contains more than most types of salmon.
- If starting the day with a bowl of breakfast cereal, make sure it is fortified with iron. This iron isn't as well absorbed as the iron in meat so add a vitamin C-rich fruit such as raspberries or strawberries, or a small glass of fruit juice to help the body to absorb this iron.

Conclusion

A good food selection is extremely important for women as they generally eat less food than men. They are therefore more at risk of having inadequate intakes of vital micronutrients. Red meat is a nutrient dense food and can play an important part in a healthy balanced diet for women by contributing key nutrients such as iron and zinc. As a rich source of protein lean red meat can also aid successful weight loss by helping to manage hunger and control appetite.

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