

Why does my preterm baby need extra iron?

Why is iron important for you and your baby?

Iron is an important nutrient in the body. It keeps red blood cells (that carry oxygen around the body) healthy. During pregnancy the red blood cells in your body increase by 20%. You need enough iron to make red blood cells for you and your baby. Mothers who have low iron stores are given iron supplements during pregnancy.

In the last 3 months before birth, a baby builds up their own stores of iron. These stores keep the baby’s red blood cells healthy for the first 6 months of life.

Preterm babies do not develop full stores. They need extra iron (in breast milk fortifier, preterm baby formula or as a medicine) to help top up these stores up.

Not having enough iron causes anaemia. Symptoms of anaemia are being pale, tired, short of breath and feeding less.

Does my baby need extra iron as a medicine?

You do not need to give your baby extra iron as a medicine if you give them:

- preterm formulas
- breast milk with breastmilk fortifier containing iron

They have extra iron added to meet your baby’s needs.

Formulas made for term babies (babies born on or after their due date) have enough iron for babies born after 34 weeks.

But, not all milks meet the high iron needs of preterm babies. Doctors help by prescribing extra iron as a medicine. Extra iron is usually sodium feredetate (27.5mg/5ml).

If your baby was born before 34 weeks (and is given milk that does not contain enough iron to meet your baby’s needs) they will need a dose of extra iron every day. The table below will help you know if your baby needs extra iron as a medicine.

My baby’s current weight	My baby is fed	Dose of extra iron my baby needs
Any weight	Formula for term infants	0.5ml once, every day
less than 1.8kg	Breast milk	0.5ml once, every day
less than 1.8kg	Breastmilk and breast milk fortifier containing no iron	0.5ml once, every day
more than 1.8kg	Breast milk	1ml once, every day
more than 1.8kg	Breast milk and breast milk fortifier containing no iron	1ml once, every day

If your baby was born between 34 weeks and 36 weeks 6 days and you give your baby mainly breast milk (over half of feeds in a day are breast milk), your baby will need 1ml extra iron (as medicine) once, every day,

How long does my baby need extra iron?

Give babies born before 34 weeks extra iron every day until at least 12 months old.

Give babies born between 34 weeks and 36 weeks 6 days extra iron every day until at least 6 months old.

Extra iron can stop when your baby is taking less formula or breastmilk and having 3 meals every day. Include iron rich foods in each meal. Preterm babies can take longer to reach this point. Talk to your doctor about giving extra iron for longer if your baby needs more time.

What foods are rich in iron?

Foods rich in iron include:

- Eggs (buy eggs stamped with the British Lion stamp).
- Red meats (beef, lamb, pork).
- Dark meat on chicken or turkey (thighs and legs).
- Oily fish like salmon, mackerel or trout (flaked no bones). Have 1 to 2 portions per week.
- Breakfast cereals with added iron. Check the nutritional information on the box.
- Pulses (beans, peas, chickpeas, lentils).
- Green vegetables (spinach, spring greens, broccoli, broad beans, runner beans).
- Dried fruit (apricots, figs, prunes, dates, raisins, sultanas). Blend or mash them as they can be a choking hazard.
- Tofu.

Vitamin C will help your baby absorb iron from plant sources.

Offer your baby sources of vitamin C at mealtimes. Foods with vitamin C in are:

- Oranges but they can also be a choking risk. Always remove skin, rind and pips. Serve in puree or mash. For baby led weaning, offer thick large wedges so baby can hold and suck out the pulp and juice.
- Steamed or roasted peppers (remove skin and seeds).
- Kiwis.
- Blueberries but they can also be a choking hazard. Blend or mash for young babies. Flatten into discs for baby led weaning. Cut into quarters for older babies as a finger food.
- Tomatoes but they can also be a choking hazard. Blend or mash for young babies. Cut cherry tomatoes into quarters for older babies as a finger food.

Useful websites for more information



NHS - weaning advice



GOSH- iron deficiency



BLISS - progressing weaning



BLISS - weaning advice



BLISS - weaning readiness

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