Iron Fact Sheet

Why is iron important in a healthy diet?
- Iron is a mineral needed to keep our bodies healthy.
- Two-thirds of iron is used in the body to form hemoglobin and myoglobin, needed to carry oxygen in the blood and muscles.
- Iron is also essential for the regulation of cell growth.

What are the signs of iron deficiency?
- feeling tired and weak
- decreased work and school performance
- slow cognitive and social development during childhood
- difficulty maintaining body temperature
- decreased immune function, with increased susceptibility to infection
- glossitis (an inflamed tongue)

Who is at risk for iron deficiency?
- pregnant women
- preterm and low-birth-weight infants
- teenage girls
- women of childbearing age, especially those with heavy menstrual losses
- people with renal failure, especially those on dialysis
- people with gastrointestinal disorders who do not absorb iron normally
- athletes, especially female athletes, swimmers, distance runners, and vegetarian athletes

Are there different forms of dietary iron?
- There are two forms of dietary iron—heme and nonheme.
- Heme iron is found in animal foods, such as red meats, fish, and poultry. Heme iron is better absorbed than nonheme iron.
- Nonheme iron is found in plant foods such as lentils, beans, spinach, and tofu.
- Eating foods high in vitamin C (with iron-rich foods) will improve the absorption of the iron.
- Tannins (found in tea), calcium, and phytates (found in legumes and whole grains) can decrease the absorption of nonheme iron. It is best to consume these foods separately from high-iron foods.

How much iron do I need?
- To avoid iron toxicity, consult with your physician before taking iron supplements.