



Ask Anya

Anya Todd is a vegan registered and licensed dietitian who graduated from Case Western Reserve University and completed her internship at the Cleveland Clinic Foundation. Anya looks forward to cooler weather and ingesting iron in the form of three-bean chili, with a side of cornbread, of course.

Q *My parents are worried about my iron intake now that I am vegan. Am I going to be anemic?*

When it comes to the “most frequently asked questions” I receive, this is number two behind “How do you get your protein?” Just like protein, many of us were taught to think meat was the only way we could obtain iron. Well, we were lied to. It’s not.

Iron is an essential mineral that helps red blood cells carry oxygen throughout the body. It also acts in energy production, as well as assists in the maintenance of the immune and central nervous systems. Two forms of iron exist in food: heme (animal sourced) and non-heme (plant and animal sourced). Heme is more bioavailable (meaning

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our bodies absorb it more easily) than non-heme; however, when it comes to being utilized on a cellular level, it makes no difference what the iron source is.

Iron-rich plant sources include legumes, whole grains, seeds, dried fruit and blackstrap molasses. Bottom-line, if you are eating a well-balanced diet, iron intake should not be an issue for you. To maximize absorption of the iron in your diet, there are “tricks” you can use, like consuming a vitamin-C-rich food at the same time. So, a bowl of three-bean chili is a total winner – a perfect combination of iron (legumes) and vitamin C (tomato sauce). Preparing your food in cast-iron cookware will also lend some iron to your diet, especially when cooking foods that are more acidic, like tomato sauce.

Conversely, there are substances that can decrease iron absorption, including tannins in green and black tea and coffee. Calcium and zinc supplements can also interfere with iron absorption, so plan to take them at different times. Antacid use can also be detrimental because it decreases the acidity of the stomach that the iron needs to properly digest.

How much iron do vegans need? This is an issue of some debate. The current government recommendation for iron is 1.8 times higher for vegetarians than for non-vegetarians because of the issue of iron bioavailability. That being said, most studies indicate that vegans have fairly equal iron intakes when compared to omnivores and no significant difference in rate of deficiencies. One’s personal iron recommendation is based on stage of life. Growing children obviously have higher needs than a middle-aged man. Women of childbearing age who must endure monthly visits from “that special Aunt” will also have increased iron needs.

When one’s diet lacks enough iron, a condition known as iron-deficiency anemia can occur. Symptoms include lethargy, headaches and irritability. As you can see from these symptoms, it is easy to mistakenly self-diagnose “anemia” as your condition when it may be something more benign, such as lack of sleep or in my case, cupcake withdrawal. If you are truly concerned, some simple blood work can reveal your iron status. In the meantime, there is an iron-packed lentil burger with your name all over it.