

— THE IRON SERIES • ISSUE ONE —

# The Iron-Pairing *Plate.*

*What to eat with iron — and what to keep off your plate.*

A free cheat sheet from Replete. Built from the research (and from being told "your iron is normal" for years).



*Photo by Ella Olsson on Unsplash*

You can eat all the iron in the world and still come up deficient if you don't pair it right. The bad news: coffee, tea, calcium and a few common foods can knock iron absorption by 40–95% in a single meal. The good news: one squeeze of lemon, a 60-minute gap, and a few small swaps can make the same plate work for you.

Stick it on the fridge. *Screenshot it for the shop.* Send it to your sister.

— EDUCATIONAL, NOT MEDICAL ADVICE. ALWAYS SPEAK TO YOUR GP. —

# [ The Meat-Eater's Plate ]

FOR OMNIVORES  
RDA • ~18 MG / DAY

Heme iron – the kind in meat, fish and poultry – is already absorbed about 2–3× better than plant iron. Your job is to eat enough of it, and to *stop accidentally blocking it*.

<p><b>+</b> PAIR IRON WITH</p> <p><b>Citrus, peppers, broccoli, kiwi.</b> Vitamin C reduces iron to a form your gut absorbs – lifting non-heme uptake up to 6×.</p> <hr/> <p><b>A squeeze of lemon on the steak.</b> Cheap, near-effortless, doesn't change the meal.</p> <hr/> <p><b>Tomato-based sauces.</b> Cooked tomato is dense in vitamin C and lycopene.</p> <hr/> <p><b>Heme + non-heme together.</b> Beef chilli with kidney beans – the meat helps you absorb the beans.</p>	<p><b>–</b> KEEP AN HOUR AWAY</p> <p><b>Coffee.</b> One cup with the meal cuts absorption up to 60%. Move it to 60–90 min after.</p> <hr/> <p><b>Black tea.</b> Worse – 41–95% depending on strength. Same rule.</p> <hr/> <p><b>Milk, cheese, yoghurt.</b> Calcium blocks iron 18–27%. Save dairy for breakfast or a snack.</p> <hr/> <p><b>Calcium supplements.</b> At least 2 hrs apart from any iron-rich meal.</p> <hr/> <p><b>Red wine.</b> Tannins behave like tea. Occasional is fine; daily plus low ferritin is a problem.</p>	<p><b>★</b> THE SMARTEST SWAP</p> <p><b>Liver, once a week.</b> Beef liver 5.8 mg, chicken liver 8 mg per 3 oz. The highest-yield meat on the planet for iron.</p> <hr/> <p><b>Oysters or mussels, monthly.</b> 7–8 mg per 3 oz.</p> <hr/> <p>Red meat over chicken breast When ferritin is low – roughly 3× the heme iron.</p> <hr/> <p><b>Cook in cast iron.</b> A tomato sauce simmered in a cast-iron pan adds 2–9 mg to the dish.</p>
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POWER MOVES

- Lemon on everything.
- Coffee 60 min after, not with.
- Dairy at breakfast, not on the steak.
- Liver weekly beats most OTC supplements.

SOURCES • NIH IRON FACT SHEET • CAMBRIDGE META-ANALYSIS ON VITAMIN C & IRON • MINI-REVIEW ON COFFEE / TEA INHIBITION (2023).

# [ The Plant-Based Plate ]

FOR VEGETARIANS & VEGANS  
RDA • ~32.5 MG / DAY

Plant (non-heme) iron is absorbed at about half the rate of meat iron. Three habits close the gap – vitamin C pairing alone lifts uptake up to 6×. Hitting ~32.5 mg/day without a strategy is hard. With one, it's straightforward.

## + PAIR IRON WITH

### Vitamin C, every meal.

Bell pepper, citrus, kiwi, strawberries, tomato, broccoli, parsley. Even a tbsp of lemon on lentils does it.

### Cooked, over raw.

Cooking spinach concentrates iron and breaks oxalates. Raw spinach in a smoothie is not the win Instagram thinks it is.

### Iron-rich pairings.

Lentils + pepper + lemon. Tofu + broccoli + sesame. Black beans + salsa + lime.

### Cast-iron skillet.

A simple chilli simmered in cast iron adds 2-9 mg to a meal.

## - KEEP AN HOUR AWAY

### Coffee.

Same rule as the omnivore plate – up to 60% reduction when drunk with the meal.

### Black, green & herbal tea.

Peppermint and chamomile contain tannins too. Move tea between meals.

### Fortified plant milks.

Most oat / soy / almond are fortified to dairy calcium levels. Use at breakfast, not in the lentil bowl.

### Calcium supplements.

Separate from iron-rich meals by at least 2 hrs.

### Wine with dinner.

Tannins again. Occasional is fine; daily plus low ferritin is a problem.

## ⌘ PHYTATE-BUSTING PREP

### Soak.

8-12 hrs for dried beans & grains. Reduces phytates 27-33%.

### Sprout.

Lentils and mung beans on the counter for 2-4 days. Up to 60% reduction.

### Ferment.

Sourdough, tempeh, miso, natto. Cuts phytates 40-90% – the most powerful single technique here.

### All three together.

Soak → sprout → ferment: up to 85%. The reason tempeh and sourdough are powerhouses.

## IRON AT A GLANCE

mg per cooked cup unless noted

6.6 <sub>mg</sub>	4.7 <sub>mg</sub>	3.6 <sub>mg</sub>	3.4 <sub>mg</sub>	2.8 <sub>mg</sub>	6.4 <sub>mg</sub>	2.5 <sub>mg</sub>
Lentils	Chickpeas	Black beans	Tofu, ½ c.	Quinoa	Cooked spinach	Pumpkin seeds, 1 oz

USDA / NIH. ACTUAL ABSORBED IRON IS ~7-12% OF THE LISTED AMOUNT UNLESS PAIRED WITH VITAMIN C.

POWER MOVES  
– STICK THESE



Vitamin C in every meal. Non-negotiable.



Soak beans overnight. It matters.



Sourdough over regular bread.



Save the matcha for between meals.

# [ If You're Taking an Iron Supplement ]

TIMING, NOT  
PRESCRIPTION  
READ THE BOX FIRST ↓

READ THIS FIRST

This is education, not medical advice.

Iron supplements should only be taken after a diagnosis of iron deficiency from a doctor, using your blood results. Too much iron is dangerous — it can cause organ damage and mask serious conditions like haemochromatosis. **Never start, stop or change a dose without speaking to your GP first.**

The notes below are timing principles from recent research — useful context for a conversation with your doctor, *not a prescription.*

— 01 — WHEN

Morning, on an empty stomach.

Ideally 30–60 min *before* food.

Stomach acid is highest in the morning, which helps absorption. Empty-stomach uptake is roughly **2–3× higher** than with food.

If empty-stomach causes nausea (it does for ~40% of people), take it 2 hrs after your last meal, before bed.

— 02 — WITH WHAT

A glass of orange juice.

Or 100–200 mg of vitamin C.

Vitamin C reduces iron to its absorbable form. The effect plateaus around **200–500 mg** — you don't need a megadose.

A small glass of fresh juice, or a single kiwi, does the job.

— 03 — WITHOUT WHAT

A 1–2 hr window, either side.

- × **Coffee, black & green tea** — polyphenols bind iron in the gut.
- × **Dairy & calcium** — separate by at least 2 hrs.
- × **Zinc & magnesium** — compete for absorption; 2 hrs apart.
- × **Antacids & PPIs** — needs a GP conversation; they reduce absorption substantially.

— 04 — HOW OFTEN

Every *other* day. Not every day.

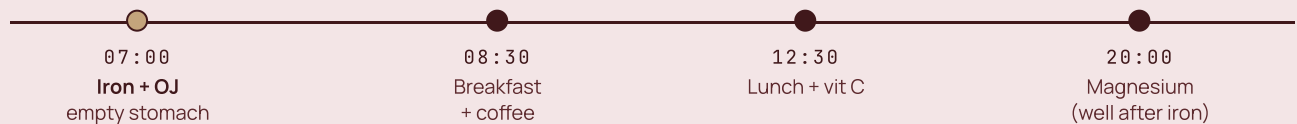
Less iron, less often, can mean more in your blood.

Trials by Stoffel et al. (2017, 2020) showed alternate-day dosing led to **higher absorption per dose** (21.8% vs 16.3% in iron-depleted women), roughly equal weekly totals, and far fewer GI side effects.

Mechanism: daily iron spikes hepcidin (the body's iron blocker), which then *reduces* what you absorb the next day. A 48-hr gap lets it reset.

A workable day — *one example*

ALTERNATE DAYS ONLY



Want to know whether it's actually working? *Replete logs your symptoms and bloodwork in 30 seconds a day* — so the trend shows up before your next appointment.

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