

# Iron Without Meat: Dr Neal Barnard's Food Guide

From *The Exam Room* podcast (Physicians Committee): "How to Get Enough Iron Without Eating Meat", Sept 2026

**Rule of thumb: "Greens and beans."** If leafy greens and legumes are part of your daily intake, you're getting the iron you need. Plant (non-heme) iron is the better form: your body absorbs more when you're low and less when you're full, which protects you from iron overload.

## Eat these: the core iron foods

| FOOD GROUP                       | SPECIFIC FOODS NAMED                                                                                                 | WHY / NOTES                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Green leafy vegetables <b>#1</b> | Spinach, kale, broccoli, asparagus (cruciferous and non-cruciferous greens)                                          | Ranked "a notch up" from beans. ~3 mg per serving. Spinach's iron <i>is</i> well absorbed (unlike its calcium). Almost zero calories, so they're the best pick if you're watching your weight. |
| Legumes <b>#2</b>                | Black beans, kidney beans (higher in iron), pinto beans, black-eyed peas, chickpeas, lentils, split peas, green peas | ~3 mg per serving. "They're all fine"; just make them routine. Barnard's favourites are black beans and pinto beans.                                                                           |
| Bean products                    | Tofu, hummus                                                                                                         | Same benefits as beans. Tofu scramble is a good breakfast source.                                                                                                                              |
| Vitamin C foods                  | Citrus fruit, a glass of orange juice; tomatoes                                                                      | Optional, but eating them with beans or greens increases iron absorption (also helpful after gastric bypass).                                                                                  |
| Whole grains                     | Pasta, toast, tortillas                                                                                              | Pair with beans ("a combination made in heaven"). Base diet: vegetables, fruits, whole grains, beans.                                                                                          |

## Sample iron-rich day

|           |                                                                                                                                |
|-----------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Breakfast | Tofu scramble with water-sautéed spinach and tomatoes, plus a glass of OJ • or a bean burrito • or beans on toast              |
| Lunch     | Split pea soup • three-bean salad • chickpea salad or hummus with a side of greens                                             |
| Dinner    | Lentil dal • black or pinto bean dishes • pasta e fagioli • pasta with green peas and nutritional yeast, plus broccoli or kale |

## Limit or avoid

|                                    |                                                                                                                 |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Red meat (heme iron)               | Absorbed whether you need it or not. Excess iron is linked to heart disease, colorectal cancer and Alzheimer's. |
| Liver and organ meats              | High in iron and cholesterol, and the liver stores toxins: "like eating the filter on your air conditioner."    |
| Cast-iron pan as your everyday pan | Iron leaches into food, especially acidic food. Occasional use is fine; otherwise "hang it on the wall."        |
| Iron-fortified foods               | Only if a blood test shows you're low.                                                                          |
| Multivitamins with iron or copper  | Choose a multivitamin <b>without</b> iron and <b>without</b> copper.                                            |

## Key numbers

- **Daily need:** ~8 mg for men; ~18 mg for women in their reproductive years.
- **Ferritin** (stored iron) **above 30** is healthy. The lower-to-middle part of the normal range is ideal; higher isn't better ("stored dynamite").
- The usual "vegans need 80% more" advice: Barnard says to ignore it if you have no symptoms and normal bloods.

## Also remember

- **Take a B12 supplement** on any plant-based diet.
- **If you're low, ask why** before adding iron: heavy periods (a low-fat vegan diet may reduce flow), GI blood loss, or endurance training.
- If you do need more iron, get it from **plant sources**.

Source: youtube.com/watch?v=CJgHHI0CukI. This is a summary of views stated in the video, not medical advice. Check with your GP before changing supplements or if you have symptoms of low iron.