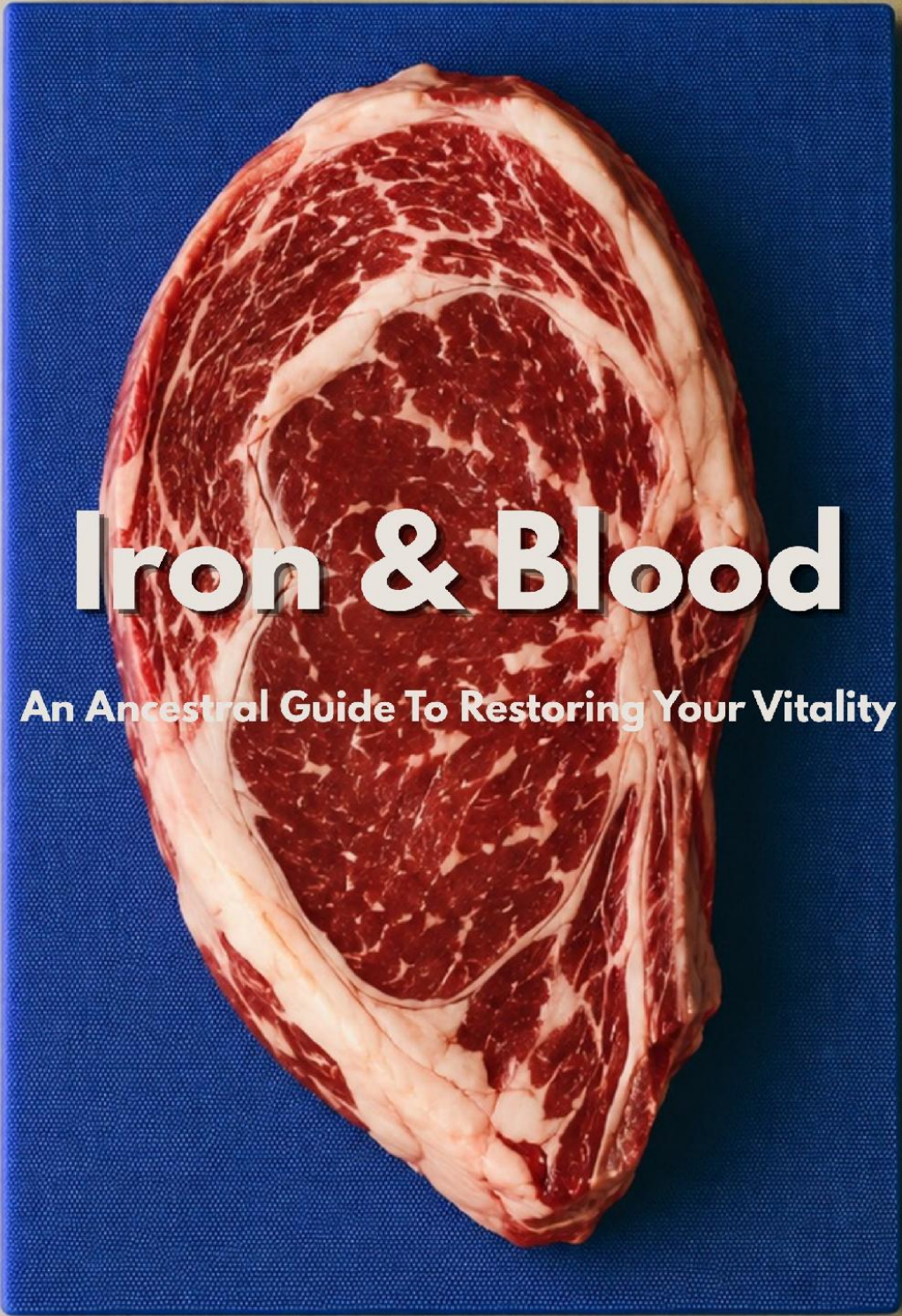




Iron & Blood

An Ancestral Guide To Restoring Your Vitality

WELLBYLARISSA

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A note before you dive in: this guide is for educational purposes only and is not a substitute for individualized medical care. Iron deficiency and anemia can have many causes, including blood loss, gastrointestinal conditions, other nutrient deficiencies, inflammation, and other medical conditions. If you suspect iron deficiency or anemia, work with a qualified healthcare professional and get appropriate testing before beginning iron supplementation. Iron supplements can be harmful when taken unnecessarily or in excessive amounts. Pregnancy, childhood, and known medical conditions all call for individualized guidance from your own clinician, not a general guide like this one.

01

WHAT IS ANEMIA?

Understanding what's happening in your blood

Anemia is a medical condition defined by a lower-than-normal concentration of hemoglobin or red blood cells, which means your tissues are getting less oxygen than they need. It can result from iron deficiency, but iron deficiency is only one possible cause among several, and iron deficiency can also exist without anemia. The two terms get used interchangeably in casual conversation, but they aren't the same thing, and this guide tries to keep them separate.

Red blood cells contain hemoglobin, a protein that carries oxygen. Hemoglobin is built with iron. Without enough iron, you make less hemoglobin. With less hemoglobin, your cells get less oxygen. And when your cells are starved for oxygen, everything slows down.

Iron deficiency anemia is the most common form of anemia globally, but it's not the only kind. There's also anemia of chronic disease, B12 deficiency anemia, folate deficiency anemia, and hemolytic anemia, among others. This guide focuses primarily on iron deficiency, because it's where food, tradition, and lifestyle have the most direct power.

Anemia affects roughly 1.6 billion people worldwide. Women, children, pregnant women, athletes, and those with gut dysfunction are at highest risk.

02

SIGNS YOU MIGHT BE LOW*Iron deficiency shows up in more ways than fatigue*

Most people know fatigue is a sign of low iron. But iron deficiency affects nearly every system in your body, and the symptoms are often written off as stress, aging, or just being a woman.

Common Signs of Iron Deficiency

- Persistent fatigue that doesn't improve with sleep
- Brain fog, poor concentration, or difficulty with memory
- Cold hands and feet
- Pale skin, pale gums, or pale inner eyelids
- Shortness of breath with minimal exertion
- Heart palpitations
- Brittle nails or spoon-shaped nails (koilonychia)
- Hair loss or thinning
- Headaches, especially upon standing
- Restless legs syndrome
- Cravings for ice, dirt, clay, or starch (called pica)
- Frequent infections or slow recovery
- Depression or low mood

Persistent fatigue, shortness of breath, palpitations, pica, restless legs, or noticeable hair or nail changes are reasonable reasons to ask your doctor for a CBC and iron studies. These are not just 'normal life.' They're worth paying attention to.

03

ROOT CAUSES

It's not always about how much iron you eat

Low iron doesn't mean you need to eat more iron. Sometimes the problem is how much you absorb, how much you lose, or what's blocking uptake at the gut level.

Intake

- Diet low in heme iron (vegetarian, vegan, or heavily processed food diets)
- High consumption of iron-blocking foods without pairing iron-rich foods

Absorption

- Low stomach acid (hypochlorhydria) can reduce iron absorption and is worth asking about
- Small intestinal bacterial overgrowth (SIBO)
- Celiac disease (diagnosed, not self-suspected, since it requires testing to confirm)
- Other digestive conditions that affect gut absorption, such as inflammatory bowel disease or prior gut surgery
- H. pylori infection

Blood Loss

- Heavy menstrual periods (one of the most common causes in women)
- GI bleeding (ulcers, hemorrhoids, Crohn's, colorectal issues)
- Frequent blood donation without replenishment

Increased Demand

- Pregnancy and breastfeeding
- Rapid growth in infants, children, and adolescents
- Endurance athletes (foot strike hemolysis, sweat losses, GI microbleeds)

Chronic Inflammation

- Chronic illness can cause the body to sequester iron as a defense mechanism
- This is called anemia of chronic disease and doesn't respond to supplementation alone

Root cause first. Before loading up on iron supplements, find out why you're low. A practitioner who looks at ferritin, stomach acid, gut health, and inflammation alongside your iron levels can help you understand not just that you're low, but why.

04

LAB MARKERS TO KNOW

Know what to ask your doctor to test

A standard CBC (complete blood count) will often miss iron deficiency until it's more advanced. Here's what to specifically ask about. Laboratory reference ranges vary substantially by lab, testing method, sex, age, pregnancy status, inflammation, and symptoms, so treat the numbers below as general orientation, not diagnostic cutoffs, and always interpret your own results with your lab's own reference range and your clinician:

Marker	What It Measures	Typical Reference Range*
Ferritin	Stored iron; usually the first marker to drop	Varies significantly by lab, ask your provider for their specific reference range
Serum Iron	Iron circulating in blood	60-170 mcg/dL
TIBC (Total Iron Binding Capacity)	Measures transferrin capacity to carry iron	250-370 mcg/dL (interpreted alongside ferritin and transferrin saturation, not on its own)
Transferrin Saturation	% of transferrin carrying iron	20-45% (low = deficiency)
Hemoglobin	Oxygen-carrying protein in red blood cells	Women: 12.0+, Men: 13.5+ g/dL
Hematocrit	% of blood that's red blood cells	Women: 36-48%, Men: 41-53%
MCV (Mean Corpuscular Volume)	Size of red blood cells	80-100 fL (a low or high value can point toward iron or B12/folate status, but MCV alone doesn't confirm a diagnosis and is read alongside the other markers here)
Reticulocyte Count	Young red blood cells, shows production rate	0.5-2.5% of RBCs

Ferritin is an important marker of iron stores, but it should be interpreted alongside hemoglobin, transferrin saturation, TIBC/transferrin, your symptoms, and the broader clinical picture, not as a single number to hit. Reference ranges vary by lab, sex, age, and pregnancy status, and ferritin can also rise independently of iron status during inflammation or illness. A low ferritin with normal hemoglobin still matters and is worth discussing with a clinician; what counts as 'enough' is genuinely individual.

05

HEME VS. NON-HEME IRON

Not all iron is created equal

Iron in food comes in two forms, and understanding the difference will completely change how you approach your meals.

Heme Iron

Found exclusively in animal foods. Heme iron is the form found inside hemoglobin and myoglobin in animal tissue. It's generally absorbed more efficiently than non-heme iron (commonly cited in the 15-35% range), doesn't rely on stomach acid to the same degree, and is generally less affected by dietary inhibitors like phytates or calcium than non-heme iron is.

- Beef, lamb, bison, venison
- Chicken and turkey (especially dark meat)
- Pork
- Liver and organ meats (among the most nutrient-dense animal foods and useful sources of iron and other blood-forming nutrients)
- Shellfish: oysters, clams, mussels
- Sardines and anchovies

Non-Heme Iron

Found in plant foods and also in small amounts in animal products. Non-heme iron is absorbed at a lower rate, commonly cited in the 2-20% range, and is heavily influenced by what you eat it with. Vitamin C can meaningfully increase absorption. Phytates, oxalates, and calcium can meaningfully reduce it.

- Lentils, beans, chickpeas
- Spinach, Swiss chard, nettles
- Pumpkin seeds, hemp seeds
- Tofu and tempeh
- Blackstrap molasses
- Dried fruit: apricots, prunes, raisins
- Dark chocolate (70%+)

The ancestral perspective: cultures with traditionally lower rates of iron deficiency have also tended to eat animal foods regularly. This pattern shows up again and again. Liver was considered a prized, healing food in many traditional cultures around the world.

06

BLOOD BUILDING FOOD CHART*Your visual reference for iron-rich eating*

Use this as your quick reference. Values are approximate, sourced from USDA and NIH Office of Dietary Supplements data where available, and reflect common preparations: meats and organ meats cooked (pan-fried or roasted), legumes and greens boiled and drained, sardines canned in oil and drained, and clams canned and drained. Iron content varies by cut, brand, growing conditions, and exact preparation, so treat this as a general guide rather than an exact reference.

Food	Serving	Iron (mg)	Type
Beef liver	3 oz	5.2 mg	Heme
Oysters	3 oz	8.0 mg	Heme
Clams	3 oz	23.8 mg	Heme
Beef sirloin (steak)	3 oz	2.0 mg	Heme
Beef (ground)	3 oz	2.2 mg	Heme
Chicken liver	3 oz	11.0 mg	Heme
Lamb	3 oz	1.9 mg	Heme
Sardines	3 oz	2.5 mg	Heme
Lentils	1/2 cup	3.3 mg	Non-Heme
Spinach (cooked)	1/2 cup	3.2 mg	Non-Heme
Pumpkin seeds	1 oz	2.5 mg	Non-Heme
Blackstrap molasses	1 tbsp	3.5 mg	Non-Heme
Dark chocolate	1 oz	3.4 mg	Non-Heme
Kidney beans	1/2 cup	2.6 mg	Non-Heme
Dried apricots	1/4 cup	1.6 mg	Non-Heme
Nettles (cooked)	1/2 cup	1.5 mg	Non-Heme

07

WHAT TO EAT IRON FOODS WITH

Pairing for maximum absorption

Iron is not just about what you eat. It's about what you eat it with. Vitamin C can meaningfully increase absorption of non-heme iron, particularly when consumed in the same meal.

Eat Iron With These

- Vitamin C rich foods: citrus, bell peppers, kiwi, strawberries, tomatoes, broccoli, parsley
- Meat, poultry, or fish alongside plant iron sources (the Meat Factor)
- Fermented foods: sauerkraut, kimchi, apple cider vinegar (traditional accompaniments to protein-rich meals; not proven treatments for low stomach acid or iron deficiency)
- Copper-rich foods: liver, shellfish, cocoa, sesame seeds (copper helps iron absorption)
- Vitamin A: liver, egg yolks, butter, sweet potato (enhances non-heme uptake)
- Beta-carotene: carrots, squash, sweet potato (converts to vitamin A)

A note on vitamin C and cooking: vitamin C is heat-sensitive, and cooking can reduce its content, with losses depending on the food, cooking method, and duration. Raw vitamin C sources are a good option, not a requirement. Fresh lemon juice squeezed over a finished dish, raw bell pepper strips on the side, sliced strawberries on a salad, or a handful of fresh parsley stirred in at the end are all easy ways to add vitamin C without much cooking. Cooking the iron-rich food itself is fine.

Practical Meal Pairing Examples

- Lentil soup finished with a heavy squeeze of fresh lemon and a handful of raw parsley stirred in off the heat
- Grass-fed beef steak with a side of raw bell pepper strips and chimichurri (fresh herb sauce packed with vitamin C)
- Liver pate on sourdough with sliced raw tomatoes and fresh parsley on top
- Spinach salad with raw strawberries, sliced kiwi, pumpkin seeds, and a citrus vinaigrette
- Clams or mussels in a tomato-herb broth with a squeeze of lemon at serving
- Black bean bowl with fresh salsa, raw sliced peppers, lime juice, and cilantro
- Ground beef or lamb taco bowl with raw cabbage slaw, fresh lime, and diced tomato
- Sardines on rye with sliced cucumber, fresh dill, and a wedge of lemon
- Bone broth soup with cooked greens, finished with a raw handful of arugula wilted in just before serving
- Hard boiled eggs alongside sliced orange segments and a few pumpkin seeds as a quick snack
- Slow-cooked beef stew, served with raw grated beet and lemon dressed on the side
- Dark chocolate (70%+) with fresh raspberries or sliced kiwi for dessert

The Meat Factor: even a small amount of meat, poultry, or fish added to a plant-based meal can meaningfully increase how much iron your body absorbs from that entire meal, not just from the meat itself. A strategic piece of salmon in your lentil bowl matters.

08

WHAT SLOWS IRON ABSORPTION

Timing is everything

You can eat all the right foods and still absorb less iron than you'd expect if a meal is working against itself. None of the foods below remove iron your body has already stored, they just temporarily reduce how much iron you absorb from that particular meal. These aren't foods to avoid forever, they just benefit from strategic timing.

Absorption Blockers

- **Tannins:** Coffee and tea

Both black and green tea contain tannins that can bind to iron and reduce how much you absorb from a meal eaten alongside them. Having tea between meals rather than with them is a simple way to work around this.

- **Calcium:** Calcium

Calcium can acutely reduce iron absorption when consumed in the same meal, particularly from supplements. The long-term effect of ordinary dietary calcium, like dairy, on overall iron status appears more modest than short-term absorption studies suggest, so there's no need to fear dairy in general. If you're actively treating diagnosed iron deficiency, it's reasonable to space calcium supplements a couple of hours from your iron-rich meals or iron supplement.

- **Phytates:** Phytates

Found in grains, legumes, nuts, and seeds. Soaking, sprouting, and fermenting these foods significantly reduces phytic acid content. Sourdough bread, for example, has far lower phytates than commercial bread.

- **Oxalates:** Oxalates

Found in spinach, beet greens, and Swiss chard. These foods do contain iron but also bind it tightly. Cooking reduces oxalates significantly.

- **Polyphenols:** Polyphenols

Found in wine, coffee, chocolate, and some fruits. Moderate your intake around iron-rich meals.

- **Medications:** PPIs and antacids

Proton pump inhibitors and antacids suppress stomach acid, which plays an important role in iron absorption. This is a cause of iron deficiency that's often overlooked.

- **Matcha:** Matcha

Matcha is more concentrated than brewed green tea, meaning its EGCG and tannin content is higher. Research on matcha specifically and iron absorption is limited, but given its concentration, it's reasonable to treat it like a stronger version of green tea and have it away from iron-rich meals rather than alongside them. This doesn't mean giving up matcha, just being thoughtful about timing.

Simple rule: save your coffee for after breakfast. Drink your matcha or tea between meals, not with them. Take calcium and iron supplements at different times of day. These are small, low-cost habits worth building if you're actively working on your iron status.

09

WISDOM FROM THE OLD WAYS

TCM, Ayurveda, and Naturopathic Medicine

Long before we named ferritin levels or understood hemoglobin, traditional cultures had sophisticated frameworks for understanding and treating blood deficiency. The following describes traditional medical frameworks and historical uses. These concepts are not equivalent to biomedical diagnoses of iron deficiency or anemia, but they carry generations of careful observation worth understanding on their own terms.

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM)

In TCM, anemia maps to 'Blood Deficiency,' a pattern in which the body lacks the nourishment carried by blood. Blood in TCM is not just a physical substance, it's a medium that roots the spirit, nourishes the tendons, moistens the skin, and anchors the mind.

Symptoms of Blood Deficiency in TCM include pale complexion, dizziness, palpitations, poor memory, scanty periods, and a tendency toward anxiety or restlessness. Sound familiar?

TCM Blood-Building Foods

- Dark leafy greens, especially cooked
- Beets and beet tops
- Black sesame seeds
- Goji berries
- Red dates (jujubes)
- Bone broth
- Chicken and beef, especially slow cooked
- Liver and organ meats
- Black beans and adzuki beans

TCM RECIPES

Red Date and Goji Berry Blood Tonic Tea

This is a classic TCM blood tonic used for centuries to address Blood Deficiency. Red dates (jujubes) nourish the Spleen and Heart, goji berries tonify Liver Blood, and longan fruit calms the Shen (spirit). Drink this warm in the afternoon, away from meals.

Ingredients

- 8-10 dried red dates (jujubes), pitted and halved
- 2 tbsp dried goji berries
- 5-6 dried longan fruits (optional, found at Asian grocery stores)
- 3 cups water

- Small piece of fresh ginger (optional)
- Raw honey to taste

Instructions

- Combine dates, goji, longan, and ginger in a small saucepan with water.
- Bring to a gentle boil, reduce heat, and simmer uncovered for 20-25 minutes.
- Strain into a mug. Sweeten with honey if desired. You can eat the dates and goji berries left in the strainer.
- Traditionally sipped warm in the afternoon as a daily tonic; gentle enough for regular use.

Black Sesame Congee (Blood-Building Rice Porridge)

Congee is a slow-cooked rice porridge used medicinally in TCM to strengthen the Spleen and Stomach, the digestive organs responsible for producing Blood. Black sesame seeds are considered one of the most potent Blood tonics in the TCM materia medica.

Ingredients

- 1 cup short-grain white rice
- 6-8 cups bone broth or water
- 3 tbsp black sesame seeds, toasted and lightly ground
- 6 dried red dates, pitted
- 2 tbsp goji berries
- 1 tsp fresh grated ginger
- Sesame oil and sea salt to finish

Instructions

- Rinse rice well. Add to a pot with broth, dates, and ginger. Bring to a boil.
- Reduce heat to lowest setting. Cook uncovered, stirring occasionally, for 45-60 minutes until porridge is thick and creamy.
- Stir in black sesame and goji berries in the last 5 minutes.
- Serve with a drizzle of sesame oil and a pinch of sea salt. This can be made in a slow cooker overnight.

Ayurveda

Ayurveda calls iron deficiency anemia 'Pandu,' meaning the pale or yellowish disease. In Ayurvedic thinking, it's often connected to weak digestive fire (agni) and an imbalance in pitta dosha.

The Ayurvedic approach emphasizes building ojas (vital essence), kindling digestive fire, and consuming easy-to-assimilate iron through food.

Ayurvedic Recommendations

- Pomegranate: one of the most prized blood-building fruits in Ayurveda
- Amla (Indian gooseberry): extremely high in vitamin C, often taken with iron formulas

- Sesame seeds: often prepared as a sweet called til laddu in the winter
- Dates and raisins: eaten with warm milk or ghee
- Nettle tea: used as a tonic herb
- Trikatu (ginger, black pepper, long pepper): used to kindle digestive fire and enhance absorption
- Cooking in cast iron vessels: can increase the iron content of food, especially acidic dishes

AYURVEDIC RECIPES

Pomegranate and Amla Morning Drink

In Ayurveda, pomegranate is considered a Rakta Shodhak, traditionally associated with nourishing and supporting the blood. Amla is naturally rich in vitamin C, a nutrient that can support non-heme iron absorption. Drink this in the morning before food to kindle agni.

Ingredients

- 1/2 cup 100% pomegranate juice (fresh pressed if possible)
- 1 tsp amla powder (available at Indian grocery stores or online)
- 1/2 tsp raw honey
- Pinch of black pepper
- 4 oz warm water

Instructions

- Combine all ingredients and stir well until amla powder dissolves.
- Traditionally drunk 20-30 minutes before breakfast, in keeping with the Ayurvedic idea of kindling agni before eating.
- This is a traditional Ayurvedic preparation, not a clinically studied iron protocol, so think of it as a ritual you enjoy rather than a treatment on a timeline.

Spiced Date and Ghee Iron Balls (Trikatu Laddu)

Laddu are traditional Ayurvedic sweet balls used as medicinal food. This version combines the iron content of dates and black sesame with the digestive fire of trikatu spices. Ghee is considered in Ayurveda to carry medicine deeper into the tissues.

Ingredients (makes ~12 balls)

- 1 cup Medjool dates, pitted
- 1/2 cup black sesame seeds, toasted
- 2 tbsp ghee
- 1/4 tsp each: ginger powder, black pepper, cardamom
- Pinch of cinnamon and long pepper (pippali) if available
- Pinch of sea salt

Instructions

- Blend dates in a food processor until a sticky paste forms.
- Add sesame seeds, ghee, all spices, and salt. Pulse until combined but still textured.
- Roll into 1-inch balls. Refrigerate until firm. Eat 1-2 daily as a traditional spiced treat.

Naturopathic Medicine

Naturopathic medicine bridges traditional herbal wisdom with functional lab testing. A naturopathic approach to anemia typically includes identifying root causes through comprehensive labs, supporting stomach acid naturally, using food-based iron alongside targeted supplementation, and addressing gut inflammation and dysbiosis.

Naturopathic Herbal Blood Builders

- Yellow dock root (*Rumex crispus*): a Western herbal tradition remedy, historically used to stimulate bile production and digestion; not an established treatment for iron deficiency
- Nettle leaf: iron, chlorophyll, and B vitamins in one herb
- Dandelion root and leaf: liver support, iron, and minerals
- Ashwagandha: a traditional adaptogenic herb studied mainly for stress and sleep; a few small studies have looked at hematological markers, but the evidence doesn't establish it as a treatment for anemia
- Rehmannia: used in TCM-informed naturopathic practice to nourish blood

NATUROPATHIC RECIPES

Long-Steep Nettle Mineral Infusion

This is not a quick cup of tea. This is the method popularized by herbalist Susun Weed: a long, slow infusion meant to draw out more of the minerals in dried nettle, including iron, folate, vitamin K, magnesium, and calcium, than a quick steep would. Nettle is a traditional mineral-rich herb, not a substitute for iron supplementation if you've been diagnosed with deficiency.

Ingredients

- 1 oz (about 1 cup loosely packed) dried nettle leaf
- 1 quart (4 cups) just-boiled water
- A quart-size mason jar
- Optional: a squeeze of lemon before drinking (enhances iron absorption)

Instructions

- Place nettle in the mason jar. Pour boiling water over, filling to the top.
- Lid tightly. Let steep for a minimum of 4 hours, ideally overnight.
- Strain and drink cold or gently warmed. Squeeze lemon into each cup before drinking.
- Enjoy as a traditional herbal infusion. If using nettle regularly or in larger amounts, particularly if pregnant, taking medication, or managing a medical condition, discuss it with an appropriate

clinician or herbal practitioner. Refrigerate and use within 36 hours. The color will be dark green and the flavor is earthy and mild.

Yellow Dock and Molasses Iron Tonic

Yellow dock root (*Rumex crispus*) is a traditional Western herbal remedy, used for generations by herbalists for its bitter, digestion-stimulating properties. It is not a proven treatment for iron deficiency, and its iron content and absorbability haven't been well studied, but it remains a respected part of traditional herbal practice.

Ingredients

- 2 tsp dried yellow dock root (available at herb shops or online)
- 2 cups water
- 1 tbsp blackstrap molasses
- 1 tsp apple cider vinegar
- Juice of 1/2 lemon
- Optional: a pinch of ginger powder

Instructions

- Simmer yellow dock root in water for 20 minutes (decoction method, covered).
- Strain into a mug. Stir in molasses, ACV, lemon juice, and ginger if using.
- In Western herbal tradition, this has been taken 1-2 times daily, between meals, typically for a few weeks at a time. Work with an herbalist or your clinician before using it regularly.
- *Note: Yellow dock can have a mild laxative effect at higher doses. Start with once daily. Do not use in pregnancy without practitioner guidance.*

Floradix is a liquid iron supplement that has roots in European herbalism and combines iron with B vitamins and plant extracts. It's a good bridge between naturopathic tradition and modern supplementation.

10

WHAT HUMANS HAVE ALWAYS DONE

Iron across history and culture

Low energy and low vitality were not new problems for our ancestors. Across many traditions, food and herbal knowledge developed around them, passed down long before anyone could measure ferritin.

Organ Meats as Medicine

In nearly every traditional culture, organ meats were prized above muscle meat. Liver was given to the sick, the pregnant, and the growing child. The Inuit ate raw caribou liver immediately after a hunt. Indigenous communities roasted marrow bones. The French built a culinary tradition around pate, rillettes, and boudin noir (blood sausage). These weren't simply delicacies. In many food traditions, they were deeply valued foods associated with nourishment, strength, and recovery.

Blood Foods

Blood sausage and blood pudding appear in cuisines from the British Isles to West Africa to Korea to Central Europe. Black pudding in England, morcilla in Spain and Latin America, dinuguan in the Philippines, and seonji in Korea are all traditional dishes built around cooked blood, one of the most concentrated sources of heme iron that exists.

Cast Iron Cooking

Cooking in cast iron pots and pans can increase the iron content of food, particularly moist, acidic foods cooked low and slow. This was the standard cookware across much of the world for centuries. The switch to non-stick and stainless steel is a comparatively recent departure from tradition.

Molasses

Before refined sugar became dominant, blackstrap molasses was a common sweetener and folk remedy. It contains 3.5 mg of iron per tablespoon alongside magnesium, potassium, and calcium. Grandmothers gave it to anemic children. It appeared in tonics, bitters, and home remedies across multiple continents.

Nettle and Herbal Infusions

Nettle (*Urtica dioica*) grows freely across North America, Europe, and parts of Asia and Africa. It has been used as a blood tonic for centuries. Susun Weed and other herbalist teachers have documented its use as a deeply mineral-rich infusion, made by steeping dried nettle in hot water for 4-8 hours. A cup of strong nettle infusion is often cited as a source of iron alongside folate, vitamin K, and magnesium, though how much actually ends up in the cup varies with the plant material and steep time, and hasn't been reliably measured across preparations.

Modern research is now able to explain some of what traditional food cultures practiced by observation. Liver, blood, organ meats, and mineral-rich herbs are genuinely concentrated sources of iron; bone broth is a nourishing, mineral-rich traditional food but not a significant iron source on its own. Come back to the foods that built blood, and know which ones are actually doing that work.

11

LIFESTYLE FACTORS

What's draining you beyond your plate

Iron deficiency isn't just a food problem. Several lifestyle patterns can directly deplete iron or compromise your body's ability to hold onto it.

Chronic Stress

Chronic stress is linked to changes in digestion and gut health that can, for some people, affect how well nutrients including iron are absorbed. It isn't established as a primary cause of iron deficiency on its own, but it's a reasonable piece of the bigger picture, especially alongside diet, sleep, and blood loss.

Overtraining and Endurance Exercise

Athletes, especially runners, lose iron through multiple pathways: foot strike hemolysis (red blood cell destruction from foot impact), sweat losses, GI microbleeds, and increased red blood cell production demand. Female endurance athletes are at particular risk. If you train hard and feel persistently flat, get your ferritin tested before assuming it's a fitness or mindset issue.

Poor Sleep

Iron plays a role in dopamine metabolism and sleep regulation. Low iron is associated with restless leg syndrome, which disrupts sleep. Poor sleep increases inflammation, which can worsen anemia of chronic disease. The relationship is bidirectional: low iron worsens sleep, poor sleep depletes recovery.

Alcohol

Regular alcohol consumption affects iron in complex ways. It can impair red blood cell production, damage the gut lining, affect folate and B12 metabolism (both needed for healthy blood), and simultaneously cause iron overload in the liver. This is not a reason for panic if you enjoy wine with dinner, but it is worth noting if you're dealing with persistent iron issues.

Heavy Periods

Losing more than 80 mL of blood per cycle is considered heavy. Many women don't know their periods are abnormally heavy because they've never had a reference point. Clots larger than a quarter, soaking through a pad or tampon in under an hour, or periods lasting longer than 7 days are worth investigating. Heavy menstrual bleeding can have several causes, including fibroids, adenomyosis, endometriosis, bleeding disorders, ovulatory dysfunction, medications, and other gynecologic or medical conditions, so getting the underlying cause evaluated alongside supporting your iron is worth doing.

If you've been eating well and supplementing but your iron stays stubbornly low, look at your lifestyle. Stress, overtraining, poor sleep, and heavy bleeding can outpace even a perfect iron protocol.

12

IRON SUPPLEMENTS

What to look for and what to avoid

Supplements can be a necessary bridge, especially when deficiency is significant. But not all iron supplements are created equal, and many common forms cause more problems than they solve.

Forms to Look For

- Iron bisglycinate (ferrous bisglycinate): an option that may be better tolerated and gentler on the gut for some people who struggle with other forms
- Iron protein succinylate: generally well tolerated; some smaller studies suggest good absorption, though it's less studied overall than ferrous sulfate
- Heme iron polypeptide (HIP): derived from animal blood, absorbed through a different pathway than non-heme forms and generally well tolerated
- Liquid iron (Floradix, Spatone): often gentler on digestion for people who are sensitive to other forms, though it typically delivers less elemental iron per dose
- Whole food iron supplements (desiccated liver capsules): food-based and well tolerated by many people, though their elemental iron content is often much lower than a standard supplement and varies by product, so check the label rather than assuming it's a strong standalone source

Other Forms You May See

- Ferrous sulfate: a widely used, effective, and inexpensive form. It works well for many people, though GI side effects like constipation and nausea are common and lead some people to try a different form
- Ferric forms (ferric oxide, ferric citrate): generally lower bioavailability than ferrous forms
- Iron oxide: poorly absorbed and a low-quality source of iron; commonly found in cheap multivitamins

What to Look For on a Label

- Vitamin C alongside a non-heme iron supplement may modestly improve absorption for some people
- Take on an empty stomach if tolerated, or with a small amount of food if sensitive
- Consider spacing from calcium supplements, coffee, or tea by a couple of hours if you're actively treating diagnosed deficiency; this matters most for supplements, less for ordinary dietary calcium
- Bisglycinate, glycinate chelate, or amino acid chelate forms
- Third-party tested (NSF, USP, Informed Sport)

Dosing

Dosing for iron deficiency is individualized and depends on how low your levels are, how you tolerate it, and your practitioner's approach; there isn't one standard dose that fits everyone. Some research has looked at alternate-day dosing (every other day) as a way to work with, rather than against, hepcidin, the hormone that regulates iron uptake, and this approach is increasingly used in practice. Talk to your practitioner about the right protocol for your specific levels.

Do not supplement with iron without testing first. Iron overload is a real condition (hemochromatosis) and supplementing unnecessarily can cause long-term harm. Test, don't guess.

13

KIDS & PREGNANCY

When iron needs spike

There are several life stages where iron needs increase dramatically and where deficiency can have serious, lasting consequences.

Pregnancy

Iron needs nearly double during pregnancy (27 mg/day vs 18 mg/day). The developing baby pulls iron from the mother's stores to build its own blood supply, which can rapidly deplete maternal reserves. Low ferritin during pregnancy is associated with preterm birth, low birth weight, and postpartum depression.

Food-first options during pregnancy often include slow-cooked beef stew, lentil soups with lemon, and molasses in oatmeal. Liver is very high in preformed vitamin A, and pregnancy guidance on how much liver (and liver pate specifically, given food-safety considerations around pate) is appropriate varies, so it's worth discussing amounts and frequency with your midwife or OB rather than eating it freely. The same goes for nettle infusions: they're used in some traditional pregnancy support practices, but should be guided by your midwife or clinician rather than self-directed. If your prenatal's iron is causing GI distress, that's a reasonable thing to bring up with your prenatal clinician, who can advise on tolerability and the right formulation and dose for you.

Infants and Toddlers

Infants are born with iron stores from their mother's supply, which begin depleting around 4-6 months. This is one reason many pediatric organizations recommend iron-rich first foods. Pureed liver, egg yolk, and slow-cooked meat were traditional first foods in many cultures, and for good reason.

Toddlers who drink large quantities of cow's milk are at increased risk for iron deficiency. Cow's milk contains very little iron, and excessive milk intake can crowd out iron-rich foods and slightly irritate the gut lining, causing small blood losses over time. Talk with your pediatrician about an appropriate amount of milk for your toddler, and prioritize iron-rich foods at meals.

Adolescent Girls

With the onset of menstruation, adolescent girls become one of the most iron-deficient demographics globally. The combination of growth demands, monthly blood loss, and often iron-poor diets (high in cereal, low in meat) creates a perfect storm. If your daughter is newly menstruating, fatigued, pale, or struggling in school, get her ferritin tested.

In the Weston A. Price tradition, liver was considered a sacred food for pregnant women and growing children. Long before nutrient panels existed, traditional cultures were paying close attention to which foods kept mothers and children thriving, and organ meats showed up again and again in that pattern.

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IRON AND FERTILITY

Why your ferritin matters before you ever conceive

Iron doesn't usually come up until the first prenatal appointment, when a midwife or OB orders blood work. By then, some women have been running low for a while without knowing it. Getting a sense of your iron status well before you start trying, rather than waiting for pregnancy to reveal it, gives you time to address it if needed.

Iron Status and Fertility: What the Evidence Shows

Adequate iron status is important before pregnancy because iron requirements rise substantially once pregnancy begins. Some research has found associations between iron status, ovulatory function, and reproductive outcomes, but fertility is complex, and current evidence does not support treating ferritin as a stand-alone measure of egg quality, implantation potential, or miscarriage risk. If you're navigating fertility concerns, iron status is one reasonable piece of a much bigger picture to discuss with your clinician, alongside thyroid function, cycle regularity, and other factors.

The Heavy Period Cycle

Heavy periods can cause iron deficiency over time, and iron deficiency is worth addressing on its own merits. If you have heavy periods and are thinking about fertility, it's worth working with a clinician on both fronts: getting the heavy bleeding evaluated and supporting your iron status.

The Preconception Iron Protocol

In the Weston A. Price Foundation's preconception nutrition guidelines, liver is listed as one of the important foods to eat regularly in the months before conception. Traditional cultures around the world practiced preconception dietary preparation, often for three to six months before a planned pregnancy, emphasizing organ meats, bone broth, eggs, and mineral-rich foods. These are foods that support building iron stores; think of this preparation period as building your own reserves before pregnancy asks for them, not as a guarantee of any particular reproductive outcome.

- Consider getting a full iron panel including ferritin before trying to conceive, so you and your clinician have a baseline
- Discuss with your clinician what ferritin target makes sense for you individually, rather than aiming for one universal number
- Liver is a traditional preconception food in many cultures and a concentrated source of iron and vitamin A; discuss appropriate amounts with your clinician given vitamin A considerations
- Traditional iron-supportive foods like nettle infusions, molasses, and shellfish can be a regular part of a preconception diet, alongside whatever else you and your clinician discuss
- Address heavy periods at the root with your clinician; causes can include fibroids, adenomyosis, endometriosis, ovulatory dysfunction, thyroid issues, and other conditions
- If you're choosing a prenatal, iron form and tolerability are worth discussing with your clinician; both bisglycinate and ferrous sulfate are used successfully depending on the person

Labs to Run Before Trying to Conceive

- Ferritin, generally considered a key marker
- Full iron panel: serum iron, TIBC, transferrin saturation
- If you or your clinician have reason to check thyroid function: TSH, free T3, free T4, and thyroid antibodies
- B12 and folate, both essential for healthy cell division and early fetal development

What Traditional Cultures Knew

Across cultures and centuries, women preparing for pregnancy were given special foods. In many Indigenous traditions, the liver and organs of freshly hunted animals were given to women of reproductive age first. In Chinese medicine, Blood tonics were prescribed in the months before conception to ensure the mother had enough to share. In Ayurveda, preconception rasayana (rejuvenation) protocols included iron-rich herbs, ghee, dates, and sesame. Across time and geography, the pattern is striking: many cultures placed special emphasis on nourishing women before conception and during pregnancy, using the foods and preparations they valued most.

Your ferritin level today is one reflection of the nutritional reserves you'll bring into a pregnancy. Building them up ahead of time, alongside good prenatal care, is worth doing for your own sake as much as anyone else's.

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SAMPLE MEAL PLAN

A week of blood-building eating

This 5-day plan is built around heme iron as the foundation, with strategic non-heme foods and vitamin C pairings throughout. Coffee and tea are timed away from meals.

MONDAY

Breakfast	Scrambled eggs with sauteed spinach and roasted red peppers, sourdough toast, fresh orange juice
Lunch	Slow-cooked beef and lentil soup with lemon squeezed in, side of sauerkraut
Dinner	Pan-seared chicken thighs with roasted broccoli and sweet potato, dressed with lemon butter
Snack	Dates with tahini, a square of dark chocolate

TUESDAY

Breakfast	Beef liver pate on sourdough with sliced tomatoes and parsley
Lunch	Sardine and arugula salad with lemon vinaigrette and pumpkin seeds
Dinner	Lamb meatballs with tomato herb sauce, over wilted spinach with garlic
Snack	Goji berries and walnuts, nettle tea infusion

WEDNESDAY

Breakfast	Bone broth with an egg poached in it, sourdough with grass-fed butter
Lunch	Black bean bowl with roasted peppers, salsa, lime, and a small piece of grass-fed beef
Dinner	Oysters on the half shell with lemon, followed by grass-fed sirloin and roasted asparagus
Snack	Blackstrap molasses stirred into warm water with a pinch of cinnamon

THURSDAY

Breakfast	Chia pudding with goji berries, pumpkin seeds, and fresh strawberries
Lunch	Chicken liver salad with caramelized onions on mixed greens with citrus dressing
Dinner	Braised lamb shank with root vegetables and bone broth gravy
Snack	Apple slices with almond butter, a few dried apricots

FRIDAY

Breakfast	Smoked salmon with avocado, capers, and a squeeze of lemon on rye
Lunch	Lentil and beet salad with fresh herbs, feta, and lemon tahini dressing
Dinner	Clam chowder made with bone broth base, fresh herbs, and a side of fermented vegetables
Snack	Dark chocolate (70%+) with red raspberries

Timing note: Having coffee or tea roughly an hour after meals, rather than with them, is a simple habit worth trying if you're actively working on your iron status.

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RECIPES*Iron-rich meals from the ancestral kitchen*

Classic Chicken Liver Pate

One of the most nutrient-dense foods you can eat. Smooth, savory, and deeply nourishing. Chicken livers are more approachable in flavor than beef liver and come together in under 20 minutes.

Ingredients

- 1 lb chicken livers, trimmed
- 4 tbsp grass-fed butter, divided
- 1 medium onion, diced
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 tbsp fresh thyme leaves
- 2 tbsp brandy or dry sherry (optional)
- 1 tsp sea salt, pepper to taste
- 1 tbsp apple cider vinegar

Instructions

- Heat 2 tbsp butter in a skillet over medium-high heat. Add onions and cook until soft and golden, about 8 minutes.
- Add garlic and thyme, cook 1 minute. Add livers and cook 3-4 minutes per side. Poultry liver should be cooked through, not left pink in the center; if you want to be certain, use a meat thermometer to confirm it has reached a safe internal temperature.
- Deglaze with brandy if using. Add ACV, season with salt and pepper.
- Transfer to a blender with remaining 2 tbsp butter. Blend until silky smooth.
- Pour into ramekins. Melt a little extra butter on top to seal. Refrigerate 2+ hours. Serve with sourdough toast and sliced tomatoes.

Blood-Building Bone Broth Lentil Soup

A warming, mineral-rich soup that pairs non-heme iron from lentils with vitamin C from tomatoes and lemon, built on a bone broth base for flavor, gelatin, and warmth. A comforting, nutrient-dense bowl built around iron-supportive ingredients.

Ingredients

- 2 cups dried green or brown lentils
- 6 cups beef or chicken bone broth
- 1 can diced tomatoes
- 1 large onion, diced

- 4 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 large carrots, diced
- 2 stalks celery, diced
- 1 tsp cumin, 1 tsp turmeric, 1/2 tsp smoked paprika
- Juice of 1 large lemon
- Handful of fresh parsley, chopped
- Sea salt and pepper to taste

Instructions

- Saute onion, carrot, and celery in butter or olive oil until softened, about 10 minutes.
- Add garlic and spices, cook 2 minutes.
- Add rinsed lentils, tomatoes, and broth. Bring to a boil, reduce and simmer 25-30 minutes until lentils are tender.
- Finish with lemon juice, parsley, and salt. The lemon at the end isn't just for flavor. It meaningfully supports iron absorption from this dish.

Oysters with Mignonette & Lemon

A few oysters can contain more iron than a 6 oz steak. They are also rich in zinc, copper, B12, and selenium. If you eat oysters, you are doing something profoundly ancestral. Humans have eaten shellfish for at least 160,000 years.

Classic Mignonette

- 3 tbsp red wine vinegar
- 1 small shallot, very finely minced
- 1 tsp cracked black pepper
- Pinch of sea salt

Combine and let sit 30 minutes. Spoon over freshly shucked oysters with a squeeze of lemon. Serve cold on a bed of crushed ice with lemon wedges. Eat immediately.

Nettle and Beet Green Iron Infusion Soup

Both dried nettle and beet greens are remarkably high in iron, folate, and chlorophyll. This soup is simple, deeply nourishing, and distinctly herbal in character.

Ingredients

- 4 cups bone broth
- 1/4 cup dried nettle leaf (or 2 cups fresh, blanched)
- 2 cups beet greens or spinach, roughly chopped
- 1 medium onion, diced
- 3 cloves garlic
- 1 tbsp grass-fed butter or lard

- Juice of 1 lemon
- 1 tsp apple cider vinegar
- Salt, pepper, nutmeg

Instructions

- Steep dried nettle in 2 cups hot water for 20 minutes. Strain and reserve liquid.
- Saute onion in butter until golden. Add garlic, cook 1 minute.
- Add beet greens, bone broth, and nettle tea. Simmer 15 minutes.
- Blend partially or fully. Finish with lemon, ACV, and a pinch of nutmeg.

A note on cast iron: cook these recipes in a cast iron skillet when you can. Research on cast iron cookware, notably a study by Brittin and colleagues, has found that acidic, moist foods like tomato sauce and applesauce pick up meaningfully more iron when cooked in cast iron compared with other cookware, sometimes several extra milligrams per serving. It's a genuinely interesting piece of ancestral kitchen wisdom, not a precise multiplier.

BREAKFAST RECIPES

Iron-Rich Egg and Greens Skillet

A fast, one-pan breakfast built around a few foods that work together well: eggs for protein, dark leafy greens for non-heme iron, and vitamin C from tomatoes to help absorb it. Done in 12 minutes.

Ingredients

- 3 large pasture-raised eggs
- 2 cups baby spinach or chopped Swiss chard
- 1/2 cup cherry tomatoes, halved
- 2 tbsp grass-fed butter or lard
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 1/4 tsp red pepper flakes
- Sea salt and cracked black pepper
- Optional: 1 oz crumbled feta or a squeeze of lemon

Instructions

- Heat butter in a cast iron skillet over medium heat. Add garlic and red pepper flakes, cook 30 seconds.
- Add tomatoes, cook 2 minutes until they begin to blister. Add spinach and toss until wilted.
- Push greens to the sides, crack eggs directly into the pan. Cover and cook to your preferred doneness.
- Season well. Finish with lemon or feta if using. Eat immediately.

Molasses Oat Bowl with Goji and Pumpkin Seeds

Old-fashioned oats are a decent plant iron source, and blackstrap molasses makes this a breakfast built around several foods that contribute iron and other nutrients involved in red blood cell production. The goji berries add vitamin C and copper. The pumpkin seeds add zinc and additional non-heme iron.

Ingredients

- 1 cup rolled oats (soaked overnight if possible to reduce phytates)
- 2 cups water or bone broth
- 1 tbsp blackstrap molasses
- 1 tbsp grass-fed butter
- Pinch of sea salt and cinnamon
- Toppings: 2 tbsp goji berries, 1 tbsp pumpkin seeds, a drizzle of raw honey
- Optional: a splash of raw whole milk or coconut milk

Instructions

- Bring water or broth to a boil. Add oats and salt, reduce to a simmer. Cook 5 minutes, stirring occasionally.
- Stir in molasses and butter off the heat.
- Top with goji berries, pumpkin seeds, and a drizzle of honey. Add milk if desired.
- *Note: if you're timing things around iron, it's reasonable to hold coffee or matcha for a bit after this meal.*

LUNCH RECIPES

Sardine and White Bean Salad with Lemon and Parsley

Sardines are one of the most iron-dense, affordable, and ancestrally eaten foods on earth. Paired with white beans and a bright lemon dressing, this is a 10-minute lunch that punches far above its effort level.

Ingredients

- 2 cans wild sardines in olive oil
- 1 can white beans (cannellini), drained and rinsed
- 1/2 red onion, very thinly sliced
- Large handful flat-leaf parsley, roughly chopped
- Zest and juice of 1 lemon
- 2 tbsp good olive oil
- 1 tsp Dijon mustard
- Salt, pepper, red pepper flakes
- Optional: capers, arugula, shaved fennel

Instructions

- Whisk together lemon juice, zest, mustard, and olive oil. Season with salt and pepper.
- Toss white beans, onion, and parsley with the dressing.
- Layer sardines over the top. Add capers or arugula if using.
- Eat at room temperature. The lemon does the heavy lifting here nutritionally.

Slow-Cooker Beef and Beet Green Bowl

Prep this the night before and you have a deeply nourishing, easy pull-from-the-fridge lunch. Beet greens are one of the most underused iron foods. The beef provides heme iron and the Meat Factor to pull more from the greens.

Ingredients

- 1 lb grass-fed beef stew meat or chuck, cubed
- 2 bunches beet greens, washed and roughly chopped

- 1 cup bone broth
- 1 medium onion, sliced
- 3 cloves garlic
- 1 tsp each: cumin, coriander, smoked paprika
- Juice of 1 lemon
- Sea salt and pepper
- Serve over: white rice, roasted sweet potato, or sourdough

Instructions

- Season beef well. Place in slow cooker with onion, garlic, spices, and broth. Cook on low 6-8 hours.
- In the last 20 minutes, stir in chopped beet greens. They will wilt into the broth.
- Finish with lemon juice. Taste and adjust salt.
- Serve over your chosen base. Store leftovers in the fridge up to 4 days.

DINNER RECIPES

Lamb Meatballs in Tomato and Herb Broth

Lamb is a good source of heme iron. Tomatoes provide vitamin C, which can help with absorption from the non-heme iron in this dish. This dinner is simple, warming, and deeply ancestral.

Ingredients

- 1 lb ground lamb
- 1 egg yolk
- 3 cloves garlic, minced, divided
- 1 tsp each: cumin, coriander, cinnamon
- 1/2 tsp sea salt, pepper to taste
- 1 can (28 oz) crushed tomatoes
- 1 cup bone broth
- Fresh parsley and mint to finish
- Serve with: warm sourdough, white rice, or roasted root vegetables

Instructions

- Mix lamb, egg yolk, half the garlic, and all spices. Form into 1-inch meatballs.
- Brown meatballs in a cast iron skillet with butter or lard, 2-3 minutes per side. Remove and set aside.
- In the same pan, saute remaining garlic 30 seconds. Add tomatoes and broth. Simmer 10 minutes.
- Return meatballs to sauce. Simmer 15 more minutes until cooked through.
- Finish with fresh parsley and mint. Serve with your chosen base.

Pan-Seared Beef Liver with Caramelized Onions and Lemon

If you've been afraid of liver, this recipe is your starting point. Low heat, slow caramelized onions, and a quick sear prevent the bitterness and chalky texture people associate with poorly cooked liver. Done right, it is savory, rich, and genuinely satisfying.

Ingredients

- 1 lb beef liver, sliced 1/2 inch thick, soaked in milk 1-2 hours
- 2 large onions, thinly sliced
- 4 tbsp grass-fed butter, divided
- 1 tbsp fresh thyme leaves
- 1/4 cup dry white wine or beef bone broth
- Juice of 1/2 lemon
- Sea salt and pepper
- Optional: fresh parsley, Dijon on the side

Instructions

- Soak liver slices in milk for 1-2 hours. This draws out bitterness. Pat completely dry before cooking.
- Cook onions in 2 tbsp butter over low heat for 30-40 minutes until deeply golden. Add thyme and season.
- Push onions aside. Raise heat to medium-high. Season liver well. Sear 2-3 minutes per side. Liver is often served with a slightly pink center, but color alone isn't a reliable safety check; if you want to be certain, use a meat thermometer and cook to a safe internal temperature for the type of liver you're using.
- Deglaze with wine or broth, scraping up the bits. Add remaining butter and lemon juice to make a quick pan sauce.
- Plate liver over onions. Spoon pan sauce over top. Serve with roasted root vegetables or mashed potatoes.

SNACK RECIPES

Blood-Building Energy Balls

These pack blackstrap molasses, pumpkin seeds, and dried apricots into a grab-and-go form. No baking. No fuss. Deeply nourishing and genuinely good.

Ingredients (makes ~14 balls)

- 1 cup rolled oats
- 1/2 cup natural nut butter (almond or cashew)
- 2 tbsp blackstrap molasses
- 2 tbsp raw honey

- 1/4 cup pumpkin seeds
- 1/4 cup finely chopped dried apricots (unsulfured)
- 1/4 cup dark chocolate chips (70%+)
- Pinch of sea salt and cinnamon

Instructions

- Mix all ingredients in a bowl until fully combined. Dough should hold together when pressed.
- Refrigerate the mixture 20-30 minutes to firm up.
- Roll into 1-inch balls. Store in an airtight container in the fridge up to 2 weeks.

Molasses, Ginger, and Date Tonic

This is a warm afternoon tonic that roots in Ayurvedic tradition, combining iron-rich molasses with digestive-stimulating ginger and the natural sweetness of dates. A functional drink that also just feels good.

Ingredients

- 1 tbsp blackstrap molasses
- 1/2 tsp fresh grated ginger (or 1/4 tsp dried)
- 1/2 tsp apple cider vinegar
- Juice of 1/4 lemon
- 8 oz warm water
- Optional: a pinch of cinnamon and cardamom

Instructions

- Combine all ingredients in a mug. Stir well until molasses dissolves.
- Drink warm, 30-60 minutes away from coffee or tea.
- Pair with 2-3 Medjool dates for an additional iron and magnesium boost.

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YOUR DAILY TIMING GUIDE

For coffee, matcha, and tea drinkers

You don't have to give up your morning coffee, your matcha ritual, or your evening tea. You just need to time them thoughtfully. This is one of the simplest, lowest-cost things to try if you're actively working on your iron status.

If you're actively trying to improve your iron status, consider having coffee or tea between meals rather than with your most iron-rich meals. A separation of roughly 1-2 hours is a practical strategy, particularly for meals relying heavily on non-heme iron. This isn't an exact science, more a reasonable way to stack the odds in your favor.

An Example Day

Time	What to Do
7:00 AM	Wake up. Drink a glass of warm water with lemon or apple cider vinegar, a traditional morning ritual many people find a pleasant way to start the day.
7:30 AM	Iron-rich breakfast: eggs, greens, liver pate, sardines, or molasses oats. No coffee yet.
8:45-9:00 AM	You can have your coffee now. Giving it roughly an hour or more of separation from your iron-rich meal is a reasonable general guideline, not an exact science.
12:30 PM	Iron-rich lunch: beef bowl, sardine salad, lentil soup. Finish with lemon-dressed greens.
2:00 PM	Second coffee if desired, or a short black or espresso. This still keeps reasonable separation from your iron-rich meals.
3:00-4:00 PM	Afternoon snack: energy balls, dates, dark chocolate, or the molasses ginger tonic.
6:30 PM	Dinner: heme-iron focused with vitamin C pairing. This is your largest iron meal if you are actively rebuilding stores.
After dinner	Herbal teas like chamomile, peppermint, ginger, and rooibos are generally considered gentler on iron absorption than black or green tea, though different plants contain their own polyphenols and haven't all been studied the same way.

The Timed Day for Matcha Drinkers

Matcha is more concentrated than brewed green tea, so if you're timing your beverages around iron-rich meals, it's reasonable to give matcha a bit more room, roughly 1-2 hours, rather than treating it exactly like a cup of brewed tea.

Time	What to Do
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7:00 AM	Wake and drink lemon water. Begin iron-rich breakfast.
7:30 AM	Iron-rich breakfast. No matcha yet.
9:00-9:30 AM	If you want matcha, giving it roughly 1-2 hours of separation from an iron-rich breakfast is a reasonable strategy.
12:00 PM	Iron-rich lunch. When possible, have matcha between meals rather than alongside your most iron-rich meals.
2:30-3:00 PM	If you want a second matcha, this is your window, provided lunch was before 1:30 PM.
6:30 PM	Iron-rich dinner, paired with vitamin C. No matcha after 3:00 PM ideally.
Evening	Herbal teas such as chamomile, rooibos, ginger, and holy basil (tulsi) are commonly used in the evening and are generally considered gentler on iron absorption than black or green tea.

The Timed Day for Tea Drinkers

Black tea has the most-studied effect on iron absorption among brewed teas, with green tea somewhat less. Herbal teas (chamomile, rooibos, peppermint, ginger, nettle) generally contain fewer or different polyphenols, though this varies by plant and hasn't been studied as extensively as black and green tea.

Time	What to Do
7:00 AM	Start with warm lemon water or the molasses ginger tonic before anything else.
7:30 AM	Iron-rich breakfast. No black or green tea yet.
8:30-9:00 AM	Black tea window. One hour after an iron-rich meal. Green tea: same timing. Herbal tea: any time.
Between meals	This is actually the ideal window for tea. Between lunch and dinner, especially, black or green tea has minimal impact on iron absorption when there is no food being digested.
With meals	Avoid black and green tea with any iron-rich meal. This is the single biggest mistake tea drinkers make.
Evening	Nettle tea, rooibos, or chamomile are a pleasant way to end the day without the tannins found in black and green tea.

Iron-Safe Beverage Swaps

Instead of (with meals)	Try this
Coffee with breakfast	Lemon water or warm broth
Matcha before lunch	Sparkling water with citrus slices
Black tea with dinner	Chamomile, ginger, or rooibos tea
Green tea mid-meal	Water with a squeeze of orange
Chai with any iron meal	Herbal chai (rooibos base, no black tea)

The goal is not to eliminate these beverages, just to be thoughtful about timing them around your most iron-rich meals if you're actively working on your iron status.

IF YOU NEED COFFEE FIRST THING

A realistic guide for people who are not going to change that

Let's be honest. For a lot of people, coffee is not negotiable. It's not a habit they want to change, it's part of how they function, how they think, how they start their day. The good news is that you do not have to give it up to rebuild your iron. You just have to build your strategy around it.

The problem with coffee and iron is not coffee itself. It's the timing. Coffee drunk alongside or immediately after an iron-rich meal can reduce iron absorption through its polyphenol and chlorogenic acid content. But coffee drunk before food, when your stomach is empty, has no iron to compete with. And coffee drunk well after a meal has less to interfere with.

An Example Day, Coffee First

The key idea: coffee before you've eaten isn't competing with any iron in your stomach yet. If you're being strategic, the window worth protecting is roughly the 1-2 hours after an iron-rich meal. What you drink before food matters much less.

Time	What to Do
6:30-7:00 AM	Wake up. Drink your coffee. There's no iron-rich food in your stomach yet for it to compete with, so this is a low-stakes time for coffee. Enjoy it.
7:00-7:30 AM	If you want a second cup before eating, this is still relatively low risk. Keep it to one more and then stop.
8:00 AM	Iron-rich breakfast. By this point your coffee is roughly an hour or two behind you. This is a good meal to prioritize iron-rich food if that's a goal for you.
8:00-9:30 AM	Give your iron-rich breakfast some space before your next coffee or tea. Water or another non-caffeinated drink works well here.
9:30 AM	If you truly need a third coffee, this is a reasonable time for it, well clear of your iron-rich breakfast.
12:30 PM	Iron-rich lunch. Stop coffee or tannin teas 30 minutes before eating and give it some space, roughly an hour or so, afterward.
2:00-2:30 PM	Afternoon coffee window, if needed. This sits comfortably between lunch and dinner with minimal iron impact.
6:30 PM	Iron-rich dinner. No coffee after this point. Herbal tea in the evening only.

The Three Rules for Coffee-First People

- **Rule 1:** Coffee before food is generally low-risk timing-wise, since there's no iron-rich meal in your stomach yet to interact with it.

- **Rule 2:** The hour or two after an iron-rich meal is a reasonable window to protect if you're actively working on your iron status.
- **Rule 3:** Shift your iron-rich breakfast 30-60 minutes later than your coffee if you can. Even modest separation is a reasonable, low-cost habit to build.

What to Eat With Your Morning Coffee (That Won't Compete with Iron)

If you drink coffee first thing and aren't ready for an iron-rich meal yet, here's what pairs well with coffee without wasting your absorption window later:

- A small handful of nuts or a piece of fruit (low in iron, so no absorption window to protect)
- Plain sourdough with butter (minimal iron, won't interfere with later iron meals)
- A boiled egg is lower-risk than a full iron meal. The heme iron is minimal and the window impact is smaller.
- If possible, give your iron-rich breakfast some separation from your morning coffee.

A Note on Habit Change

You don't have to overhaul your morning to be thoughtful about your iron. One simple change to try if you're coffee-first: eat your iron-rich breakfast a bit after your last morning coffee rather than alongside it. Give it time and consistency, and let your labs, not a calendar, tell you whether it's making a difference.

Bottom line: coffee before food is a reasonably low-impact time to have it. Coffee during or immediately after an iron-rich meal is when it's most likely to interfere with absorption from that meal. Shifting the meal instead of giving up the coffee is often the easiest fix.

YOUR BODY KNOWS HOW TO BUILD BLOOD.

Feed it the way your ancestors did. Test. Pay attention. Trust the wisdom that has always been there.

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SOURCES & FURTHER READING

Where the numbers and claims in this guide come from

This guide leans on ancestral wisdom, traditional food practices, and generations of lived observation, and it also leans on current nutrition science where it exists. The two aren't always the same kind of evidence, and this section tries to be honest about which is which. Where a claim reflects a specific study or reference source, it's noted below. Where a claim reflects traditional use (TCM, Ayurveda, Western herbalism, or family and cultural food tradition), it's presented as exactly that: a tradition, not a clinical trial.

Biomedical and Nutritional References

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Traditional and Historical Sources

The Traditional Chinese Medicine, Ayurvedic, Western herbal, and naturopathic material in this guide reflects historical and traditional use, much of it documented by practicing herbalists and traditional medicine teachers (including the long-steep nettle infusion method popularized by herbalist Susun Weed), rather than biomedical research. These frameworks predate modern lab testing and describe patterns of the body in their own terms, Blood Deficiency, Pandu, weak agni, and so on, which are not equivalent to a biomedical diagnosis of iron deficiency or anemia. They're included here because they carry real generations of careful observation, and because many readers of this guide value that lineage alongside modern science, not instead of it.

A general note on supplement and herb claims throughout this guide: where the evidence for a specific herb or supplement claim is limited, preliminary, or based on a small number of studies (as with ashwagandha and hematological markers, or yellow dock and iron absorption), this guide tries to say so plainly rather than presenting early or mixed evidence as settled fact.

This guide is for educational purposes only and is not a substitute for individualized medical care. Iron deficiency and anemia can have many causes, including blood loss, gastrointestinal conditions, other nutrient deficiencies, inflammation, and other medical conditions. If you suspect iron deficiency or anemia, work with a qualified healthcare professional and get appropriate testing before beginning iron supplementation. Iron supplements can be harmful when taken unnecessarily or in excessive amounts. Pregnancy, childhood, and known medical conditions all call for individualized guidance.

Thank you for reading this far, and for caring enough about your own body to want the real story, not just the easy one. Feed yourself well. Get your labs checked. Trust the wisdom that has always been there, and the science that helps us understand it a little better every year.

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