

Fuelled by Iron

A guide to help whānau include lean red meat as a first food for babies and toddlers.



Introduction

New Zealand beef and lamb are naturally high in iron and are a great first food option for babies. Introducing iron-rich foods, like beef and lamb from around six months of age is essential. This is when their iron stores begin to deplete, but requirements are high. Including red meat early helps meet their increasing nutritional needs during this critical time.

Why is iron essential for babies and toddlers?

Iron helps:

- Support healthy growth
- Turn food into fuel for active little bodies
- Carry oxygen to the brain and muscles
- Support brain development and learning
- Strengthen the immune system
- Maintain energy levels

How much iron do babies and toddlers need?

Babies aged 7-12 months typically require about 11mg of iron a day, while toddlers aged 1-3 years need around 8-10mg per day. This is more iron than an adult male needs! Meeting the Ministry of Health's Food and Nutrition Guidelines for Infants and Toddlers is crucial for optimal health and development. For more tips on introducing solids please visit www.health.govt.nz.

Top tip

Eating haem iron foods with vitamin C-rich foods can boost the absorption of non-haem iron.

Food sources of iron

There are two main types of iron which can be found in a variety of foods: haem iron and non-haem iron. Haem iron is easily absorbed and found in animal-based foods such as red meat, seafood and chicken. Non-haem iron, found in plant-based foods such as lentils, beans, spinach, and fortified cereals, is not absorbed as easily.

Eating a combination of foods high in both haem and non-haem iron helps provide babies and toddlers with an iron-rich diet.



Solid progression at age and stage

Smooth stage (around 6 months)

Puree the meat and veggies until smooth, adding a little breast milk, formula or boiled water. Offer small amounts after breast milk or formula feeds.



Mashed/lumpy stage (around 6½-7 months)

Mash the meat and veggies to a soft, lumpy texture so your baby can start exploring new textures. Offer mashed foods after breast milk or formula feeds.



Minced and chopped stage (from 8 months)

Cut food into very small, bite-sized pieces so your baby can explore different tastes and textures. Offer chopped or minced foods before milk.



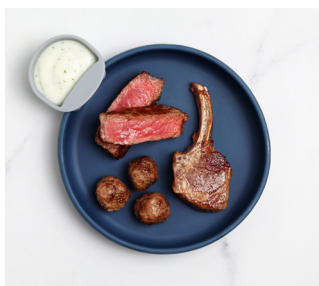
Toddler/family foods (around 12 months)

Serve meals just like you would for the rest of the family, chopping larger pieces into toddler-friendly sizes. Encourage them to use a fork and offer solids before milk.



Finger foods

Offer soft iron-rich finger foods like meat-based fritters from 6½-7 months, and options like thin slices of meat or meatballs from 8-9 months. From ~12 months they can chew on cutlets or chops under supervision.



Baby and toddler-friendly meatball and pasta recipe

This is a recipe the whole family can enjoy, adapt it for the age and stage of your child.

Ingredients

- 500g beef or lamb mince
- 1/4 cup breadcrumbs
- 1 egg
- 2 Tbsp cows milk
- 1 Tbsp mixed herbs
- 1 garlic clove, crushed
- 1/2 onion, finely chopped
- 2 Tbsp tomato paste
- 1 red capsicum, finely sliced
- 2 carrots, grated
- 1 courgette, grated
- 400g can chopped tomatoes in juice
- 1/2 cup reduced salt beef stock
- 1/2 cup water

Method

1. Heat oven to 180°C
2. Mix mince, breadcrumbs, egg, milk, and herbs in a bowl
3. Roll into small balls and place on a lined oven tray, bake for 20 mins
4. Make the sauce while the meatballs are cooking. Sauté the onion and garlic in oil until soft
5. Add tomato paste, capsicum, carrots, and courgette, stir over heat for 5 mins
6. Add the canned tomatoes, beef stock and water, stir and cook for 10 mins, on a medium heat
7. Add the meatballs to the sauce



Lean red meat can be described as nature's power pack. Even a small serve has plenty of nutrients. It is high in iron, and an important part of a healthy balanced diet, alongside wholegrains, fruits, and vegetables.

Health problems, such as iron deficiency, may occur if little ones aren't getting the right foods. They may also have a medical basis unrelated to diet. The information in this fact sheet is only general and should not be taken as a substitute for medical advice in relation to specific symptoms or health concerns. For tailored advice, please consult a Registered Dietitian or your local GP. (July 2025)

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