

What is Hemoglobin?

One of the most common reasons potential blood donors are turned away is that the hemoglobin level in their blood is below the required level for donation. Hemoglobin is a protein that contains iron. It carries oxygen to the tissues and gives blood its red color. The most frequent cause of low hemoglobin is insufficient iron. In adults, iron deficiency develops when too little iron is absorbed from food to replace any iron lost.

The amount of iron absorbed from food depends on how the iron is “packaged” in the food. It also depends on the combinations of food you eat, because some foods, beverages, and minerals can prevent the body from absorbing iron. Others help the body absorb it.

Iron is best absorbed from animal foods: red meat, veal, pork, chicken, turkey, and seafood—but not from milk or dairy products. The calcium in milk and other dairy products can also block iron absorption. For example, it is better to drink orange juice with your hamburger, and then wait a couple of hours before drinking milk.

When you plan to give blood, here are some **Facts About Food** to keep in mind in the weeks before your donation:

Facts About Food

These foods contain iron:

- Raisins
- Meat (liver is the highest)
- Fish
- Poultry
- Eggs (yolk)
- Legumes (peas and beans)
- Whole grain bread

These foods will help your body absorb iron:

- Citrus fruits and drinks
- Fresh fruits (e.g. apples, peaches, pears)
- Fresh or lightly cooked vegetables

These may make it hard for your body to absorb iron:

- Tea, coffee
- High bran foods
- Whole wheat bakery products
- Calcium supplements
- Antacids (While some of these are part of a balanced diet, you can help your body absorb iron by eating them at a separate meal.)

We want you to be healthy and happy when giving blood. Thank you for your life-saving donation!