Dear Alice,

I was recently turned away from a blood donation site for slightly low hemoglobin. I'm a menstruating woman and a vegetarian, so it wasn't a big shock. I'm trying to add more iron to my diet in the form of beans and cruciferous veggies and eggs (cooked on cast iron!), but I've run into some confusion. The pamphlet I got from the blood bank suggests raisin bran as a very good source of iron. Several health articles and studies I've found online also point to raisin bran, but others say that wheat bran inhibits iron absorption and should be avoided when trying to raise iron levels. Sometimes the conflicting information comes from the same source! Can you shed any light on this, Alice? Would a bowl of raisin bran a day help or hurt my iron intake?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Props to you for wanting to donate blood! Alas, isn't it iron(ic) that one of the foods with higher iron content also may contain an iron absorption inhibitor? It's one thing to worry about getting enough iron through your food sources, but a whole other thing to worry about whether that iron is actually being absorbed. Boosting your hemoglobin by upping your iron intake needn't be too tricky, but know that there are a number of possible causes for low hemoglobin — being low on iron is only one cause (more on that later).

First, about the raisin bran: Phytic acid is often found in foods that contain whole grains, including some types of raisin bran. In large enough quantities, phytic acid can inhibit your body's iron absorption. This is annoying since these foods may also be high in iron. In addition to iron absorption inhibitors, there are also substances that aid in iron absorption. The primary is vitamin C, which is often also found in raisin bran. Your best bet is to check food labels so you know when you are consuming foods that contain phytic acid (and also whether it contains a substance such as vitamin C, which will help you absorb iron). If food products contain iron and phytic acid, chances are you'll still likely get at least some iron benefit from them (especially if that food contains vitamin C, too); however, it's wise to have additional sources or iron other than raisin bran. Another iron absorption inhibitor is tannic acid, which is often found in red wine, coffee, some teas, chocolate, and some sodas.

So what does all this mean? Diversified food sources of iron will be your best bet in ensuring that you meet your recommended daily allowance, but there's no harm in making raisin bran...
one of those sources. Check out the related Q&As for more information on iron, how much you need, and getting enough of it through your diet.

Now, are you sure low iron is the cause of your low hemoglobin? There are several other possible causes. Cirrhosis (scarring) of the liver is one cause. Some common causes of cirrhosis include alcohol abuse, hepatitis B or C, cystic fibrosis, and some parasites caused by chronic liver damage. These conditions, as well as the cirrhosis itself, would likely be accompanied by additional symptoms, such as fatigue, nausea, weight loss, or easy bruising.

Other causes can include certain cancers of the blood (e.g. leukemia, multiple Myeloma) or of the lymphatic system (e.g. Hodgkin's and non-Hodgkin's lymphoma), enlarged spleen (splenomegaly), or vasculitis (inflammation of blood vessels caused by an autoimmune response of various origins). Though anemia and iron deficiency are common causes of low hemoglobin, it may be worth a trip to your health care provider to rule out these other causes.

Happy hemoglobin boosting!

Alice!

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