Whether you're lifting weights, training for a marathon or just trying to stay fit, iron is one nutrient that needs to be in balance for peak performance. Iron deficiency anemia is relatively common among all teenage girls and women. It's even more common among female athletes, especially runners and ballet dancers.

Iron is a mineral that is found in every cell in the body. It’s an important part of red blood cells, which carry oxygen to all the cells. Our cells use oxygen to make energy from the food we eat. Iron is also needed to keep the immune system healthy and help brain cells work normally.

Iron literally gives the body energy by helping carry oxygen from the lungs to muscles during exercise. When iron stores become low, the flow of oxygen to the muscles slows down. As a result, carbohydrates and fats are not burned as efficiently and performance suffers.

What happens if we don’t get enough iron? Iron deficiency is the most common nutritional deficiency in the world. Severe iron deficiency can lead to one type of anemia. Iron deficiency can be caused by several factors including: not getting enough iron in the diet, not absorbing iron properly and losing blood from injury or illness. Without adequate iron, red blood cells cannot carry enough oxygen to other cells in the body.

The recommended daily intakes of iron range from men, ages 19+ at 8 mg/day to pregnant women at 27 mg/day. Signs of an iron deficiency include fatigue, infections, muscle weakness and lack of the ability to concentrate.

Both animal and plant foods contain iron, but our bodies absorb the iron from meats better than from plants. To increase the amount of iron that is absorbed from plant foods, eat them with foods high in vitamin C or with meat, poultry, or fish. Foods high in vitamin C include oranges, strawberries and peppers.

Some people need iron supplements. These people may include pregnant women and people with an iron deficiency. People who do not get enough iron from food may choose to take a multivitamin/mineral supplement that contains iron. Be sure to keep supplements out of the reach of children because an overdose of iron can be fatal. It's best to take iron supplements only under the advice of a physician or dietitian. Too much iron can be as detrimental to your health and performance as too little.

A better choice is to make sure your iron reserves never dwindle by eating a variety of iron-rich foods. Eat foods high in iron: red meat, fish, chicken, liver, eggs, dried fruits such as apricots, prunes, and raisins, lentils and beans and green, leafy vegetables such as spinach and broccoli or cereal with iron in it (iron-fortified).

Sources: University of Florida; Colorado Cooperative Extension
CAJUN BEEF TENDERLOIN

1 beef tenderloin (3 pounds)
4 teaspoons salt
1 tablespoon paprika
2 1/4 teaspoons onion powder
1 1/2 teaspoons garlic powder
1 1/2 teaspoon white pepper
1 1/2 teaspoons pepper
1 to 3 teaspoons cayenne pepper
1 teaspoon dried basil
1/2 teaspoon chili powder
1/8 teaspoon dried thyme
1/8 teaspoon ground mustard

Tie tenderloin at 2 inch intervals with kitchen string. Combine the seasonings. Rub over beef. If grilling, prepare the grill for indirect heat. Coat grill rack with nonstick cooking spray before starting the grill.

Grill tenderloin, covered, over indirect medium meat for 50 - 60 minutes, turning occasionally, or until meat reaches desired doneness. For medium-rare, 145 degrees; medium - 160; well-done - 170. Let stand for 10 minutes before slicing.

To roast the tenderloin, bake on a rack in a shallow roasting pan at 425 degrees for 45 - 60 minutes or until meat reaches desired doneness. Yield: 12 servings.