

Vitamin K for your newborn baby

An information guide



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Rarely, a newborn baby may start to bleed spontaneously for no reason, which could put the baby at risk of becoming very ill and might even cause the baby to die. The baby may start to bleed inside so that it is not possible to see the bleeding. If babies are given vitamin K shortly after they are born, then this small risk that they might start bleeding is removed. **This is why the Department of Health and the medical staff at this hospital recommend all new babies have vitamin K at birth.**

What is vitamin K?

Vitamin K is a vitamin which occurs naturally in food especially in liver and some vegetables. We all need vitamin K; it helps to make the blood clot. During early infancy when fed entirely on milk, babies have very little vitamin K. A very small number of babies suffer bleeding due to vitamin K deficiency; this is called vitamin K deficiency bleeding or VKDB for short.

What is VKDB?

VKDB is a rare disorder, which occurs in newborn babies leading to bleeding from the nose, mouth, cord stump, bowels, kidney or into the brain. The bleeding is not always visible. When it occurs in the brain it may cause brain damage or even death.

What's the risk of my baby having VKDB?

The risk is very small. VKDB can happen in 1:10,000 full term babies if they do not get extra vitamin K. If vitamin K were not given, of the 800,000 recorded births in the UK every year, 10 to 20 babies could be brain damaged as a result of a bleed in the brain, and 4 to 6 babies could die. This risk is eliminated when your baby is given a vitamin K supplement in sufficient amounts.

Recognising the warning signs of VKDB

Many babies who later suffer bleeding in the brain have had prior minor bleeds from the skin, bowels or kidneys. Therefore minor bleeds or bruising any time in the first six months of life must be looked at urgently.

Any baby who is still jaundiced after two weeks of age must be seen by a doctor, community midwife or health visitor – especially if they are not gaining weight properly, have pale stools and dark urine, or are ill in any way.

Why give vitamin K to all babies? Can't high-risk babies be recognised?

Bleeding happens unpredictably in some babies and it's not possible to identify babies as high or low risk with absolute certainty. The range of risk factors is broad but in some babies without risk factors, bleeding occurs for unknown reasons in the first few weeks of life and of babies who suffer bleeding about a quarter have no evident risk factor.

Which babies are at greater risk?

Bleeding in the first 24 hours after birth is a particular risk to babies of mothers on certain drugs, such as anticonvulsants. Bleeding after 24 hours following birth is more common and babies at greater risk are those who:

- Are premature
- Are exclusively breastfed (see paragraph below)
- Had a complicated delivery e.g. a forceps delivery, or born with excessive bruising
- Have liver disease that may show as prolonged jaundice or as other symptoms, such as pale stools or dark urine
- Fail to take or find it hard to absorb feeds
- Are ill for other reasons
- Have bleeding or spontaneous bruising in early infancy.

Can vitamin K supplement be harmful?

Experts advise that the evidence suggests that it is not. Concerns about a statistical possibility of a link between the use of injected vitamin K and childhood cancer were raised by some studies in the early 1990's but several other studies have not confirmed this. A larger study from the UK Children's Cancer Study Group in 2003 found no proof that giving vitamin K injection to newborn babies increases the risk of children developing leukaemia or any other cancer.

What do I need to do, and when do I need to start thinking about this?

As it is recommended that all babies are given a vitamin K supplement your midwife will offer vitamin K immediately after the birth, so during the antenatal period you should consider whether you would like vitamin K to be given to your baby and if you do, whether it is given by mouth or by injection.

How is vitamin K given?

There are two methods of giving vitamin K to your baby:-

- By injection
- By mouth

By injection

A single intra-muscular injection of vitamin K prevents VKDB in virtually all babies. Only one injection is needed which is given immediately after birth. It does not need to be repeated. ***This is the method recommended by the medical staff at this hospital.***

By mouth

This method can be just as effective as having an injection but only if doses are repeated. If you choose to have doses of vitamin K by mouth for your baby, you need to be aware of the necessity for further doses at the agreed times. These may need to be given by your healthcare professional and it is important that you can be available for these to be given.

- Two doses are advised in the first week for all babies
- For exclusively breastfed babies, it is recommended that a third dose of 2mg vitamin K be given at one month of age. On this regime it is essential that you make sure the third dose is given.

Breastfeeding and VKDB

Breastfeeding gives babies the best start in life. Breast milk provides exactly the right nutrients, growth factors, hormones and immunity a young baby needs to grow and develop. It is recommended that all newborn babies are given a vitamin K supplement at birth to avoid the rare but serious (and sometimes fatal) disorder VKDB. The only reason that breastfed babies are at greater risk of vitamin K deficiency bleeding than formula fed babies is that vitamin K is added to formula milk.

Breastfeeding is recommended by all medical and midwifery staff at this hospital. Don't swap simply for the added vitamin K in formula milk.

What happens if I do not want my baby to have vitamin K?

If you do not wish for your baby to have vitamin K, even after a discussion with a senior doctor, we will ask you to sign a form to say that you confirm that you are aware of the implications of this decision. Your GP will also be notified.

More information?

If you wish to discuss vitamin K further please speak to your midwife or doctor at your next antenatal appointment.

**NHS Choices is a free on line information service for parents packed with information and resources on pregnancy and babies.
www.nhs.uk**

If English is not your first language and you need help, please contact the Interpretation and Translation Service

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