

Vitamin K for Newborn Babies

Information for parents

This leaflet explains what vitamin K is, and its importance in preventing bleeding problems in newborn babies. We hope it gives you enough information to help you make an informed choice about this part of your baby's care.

What is vitamin K?

Vitamin K occurs naturally in food (especially red meat and some green vegetables). It is also produced by friendly bacteria in our gut. We all need it as it helps to make our blood clot and to prevent bleeding problems. Newborn babies and young infants have very little vitamin K.

How do low levels of Vitamin K affect a newborn baby?

A very small number of babies suffer bleeding problems due to a shortage of vitamin K.

This is called Vitamin K Deficiency Bleeding (or VKDB for short). The classical form usually happens in the first week of life. The baby may bleed from the mouth or nose or from the stump of the umbilical cord.

Late onset VKDB is a more serious problem which happens after the baby is about three weeks old. The bleeding is sometimes into the gut or the brain and in some cases it can cause brain damage or even death.

How can Vitamin K Deficient Bleeding be prevented?

The Scottish Government recommends that all newborn babies are given vitamin K to reduce the chances of dangerous internal bleeding. The most effective treatment is a single dose of vitamin K injected into the thigh muscle shortly after birth. Vitamin K by mouth is also effective in most cases but your baby will need to have a number of doses through the first 1-3 months of life. Vitamin K by mouth may not work in a small number of babies.

Does my baby get vitamin K from their milk?

Whilst breastfeeding is recommended due to its many benefits for baby and mother, it contains very little vitamin K, and therefore breast feeding does not prevent VKDB. Most cases of VKDB in the UK occur in breastfed babies who have not any vitamin K supplements or in babies who have not completed a full course of vitamin K given by mouth (if some doses are missed or vomited) ¹.

Formula milk has vitamin K added (except Soya Formula) but some formula fed babies, who have not had an injection of vitamin K, do get VKDB if they have problems with their liver ¹. Babies with liver disease do not absorb vitamin K very well from their milk.

When do I need to start thinking about this?

During your pregnancy you must consider whether your baby should receive vitamin K, and if so, how it should be given. Vitamin K for your baby should be given as soon as possible after birth.

What is the risk?

VKDB occurs in one in every 8,500 full term babies if no vitamin K supplement is given. In the whole of the UK, if no vitamin K supplement was given, 10 to 20 of the 800,000 babies born each year might be brain damaged as a result of a bleed into the brain, and about five babies would die of this condition.

Final thoughts

If you decide against vitamin K supplements for your baby it is extremely important to be aware of the risk of VKDB. **Remember that in most cases there are no warning signs.**

You should seek medical help at once if there is any of the following

- Easy bruising especially around the baby's head and face.
- Bleeding from the nose or umbilical cord
- Jaundice (yellow eyes and skin) after the first 3 weeks
- Blood in the stool, black tarry stool or vomiting blood
- Paler than usual skin colour
- Irritability, seizures, excessive sleepiness, or repeated vomiting

This leaflet has been written to help you understand the importance of giving your baby vitamin K, but do not be alarmed. VKDB is uncommon and, although serious, the condition is preventable.

Further information

¹McNinch A, Busfield A, Tripp J Vitamin K deficiency bleeding in Great Britain and Ireland: British Paediatric Surveillance Unit Surveys, 1993–94 and 2001–02 Archives of Disease in Childhood 2007;92:759-766.