
Vitamin K and your newborn baby

This leaflet explains why we advise extra vitamin K to be given to your baby once they are born. If you have any questions or concerns, please speak to your midwife, health visitor or GP who will be happy to help you.

Why does my baby need vitamin K?

Compared with adults, all babies have very low levels of vitamin K in their bodies. Without vitamin K, blood cannot clot normally and the baby can develop a tendency to bleed easily. In some cases, this leads to serious bleeding from the stomach, umbilicus (navel) or intestine (gut) and in a few cases to bleeding in the brain. This condition is called Vitamin K Deficiency Bleeding (VKDB).

Studies show that in babies who do not receive vitamin K, the risk to the baby of developing VKDB is one in 10,000. However, it is not possible to predict which babies are at risk of bleeding. We do know that this potentially dangerous condition can be reduced by giving the baby vitamin K after birth.

How can I protect my baby from Vitamin K Deficiency Bleeding (VKDB)?

We recommend that all babies are given an injection into the thigh muscle in the first day of life as this effectively prevents VKDB in virtually all babies. Should you decide that you do not wish your baby to have any form of vitamin K supplement, it is important to discuss this with your GP or community midwife who can advise you of the actions to take if symptoms of VKDB appear.

The current preparation used for both Intramuscular injection and oral administration of vitamin K is prepared from an animal derived (bovine) source. There is currently no other vitamin K product licensed and available for use as an alternative. If you have reasons why you would not wish your baby to receive an animal derived product we are currently unable to offer a substitute preparation as there is no licensed product available.

Can Vitamin K be given orally?

Vitamin K can be given to babies as a liquid by mouth. However, it is less effective as the absorption of the whole drug cannot be guaranteed. Oral vitamin K has to be given in a three-dose course over the first four – six weeks and there is a risk that babies will miss out on the second or third doses and therefore not complete the course.

Can Vitamin K harm my baby?

In 1992, one study suggested that vitamin K given by injection was associated with a higher risk of childhood cancer than giving vitamin K by mouth or no vitamin K at all. This study caused concern and for some time hospitals have given vitamin K by mouth to newborn babies. Further research in several countries since 1992 has not confirmed the link between the vitamin K injection and childhood cancer.

If you have any questions please ask your midwife or GP.

For more information visit www.nhs.uk/conditions/pregnancy-and-baby/pages/your-baby-after-birth

If you require this information in an alternative language or format (such as Braille, audiotape or large print), please ask the staff who are looking after you.