



Vitamin K for newborn babies

Why does my baby need vitamin K?

Babies are born with low levels of vitamin K in their bodies.

Without this vitamin, babies can be prone to bleeding as their blood is less likely to clot normally.

In some cases, this can include serious bleeding from the stomach, navel (belly button) or intestine and, more rarely, the brain. This bleeding condition is called vitamin K deficiency bleeding (VKDB).

It's not currently possible to predict which babies are at risk of bleeding, but the chances of developing VKDB can be reduced by giving the baby vitamin K following birth.

Studies suggest that if a baby doesn't receive vitamin K, the risk of them developing VKDB is around 1 in 10,000

There are three types of VKDB. Vitamin K is given at birth to prevent all three types of VKDB.

Early-onset VKDB

Early-onset VKDB is very rare and occurs within 24 hours of birth. This type of VKDB is seen in babies whose mothers are taking certain types of drugs, such as warfarin or antibiotics.

Classic-onset VKDB

This usually occurs between days two and seven following birth. In this type of VKDB, bleeding may occur under the skin, in the intestine or from a circumcision wound.

Late-onset VKDB

This can occur between eight days and three months following birth. Some babies with this type of VKDB may have liver disease, which is not prevented by giving vitamin K. The most common areas of bleeding are the skin, intestine and brain.

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.

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 breastfeeding does not prevent VKDB.

Most cases of VKDB in the UK occur in breastfed babies who have not received 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).

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.

Babies with liver disease do not absorb vitamin K very well from their milk.

How can I protect my baby?

We recommend a vitamin K injection into the thigh muscle in the baby's first day following birth. This effectively prevents vitamin K deficiency bleeding (VKDB) in virtually all babies.

The vitamin K injection is given as a single dose, which releases the vitamin into the body over several weeks.

Can vitamin K be given orally (by mouth)?

Vitamin K can be given to babies orally as a liquid. However, this is not considered to be as effective as the injection, as it is less likely to be fully absorbed by the body.

Vitamin K by mouth is effective in most cases but your baby will need to have multiple doses during the first one to three months of life. Vitamin K by mouth may not work in a small number of babies.

If you choose an oral vitamin K supplement for your baby, instead of the injection, it's very important that they receive all doses.

How is oral vitamin K given?

If you choose the oral vitamin K option for your baby, your midwife will give the first dose.

You will need to give any further doses to your baby yourself.

Your midwife will supply the vitamin K and oral syringe and tell you how and when to give the doses.

Please record this in your baby's child health record (red book)

Can vitamin K harm my baby?

In the 1990s some studies raised concern about a possible link between childhood cancer and injected Vitamin K given to newborn babies. However, more recent research has shown there is no increased risk of cancer following Vitamin K administration.

How do I decline vitamin K for my baby?

It is your right to decline any form of vitamin K supplement for your baby, you will be offered the opportunity to discuss this with a neonatal doctor so that you can make an informed decision. We recommend you inform your GP and community midwife if you decide to decline.

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 three weeks
- Blood in the stool, black tarry stool or vomiting blood
- Paler than usual skin colour
- Irritability, seizures, excessive sleepiness, or repeated vomiting

What if my baby is born early or is poorly when they are born?

If your baby is born prematurely or is poorly when they're born, we will usually admit them to the Neonatal Unit and give them a vitamin K injection as part of their care.

Department address and contact information:

If you would like further information, please discuss this with your midwife or with your baby's doctor.

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