

Vitamin K supplement for newborns

Information and advice for mums-to-be

Maternity

The Department of Health recommends that all babies should be given a vitamin K supplement at birth. We hope you will find this information useful in helping you to decide whether to allow your baby to have a vitamin K supplement at birth.

What is vitamin K?

Vitamin K is a vitamin which is found naturally in foods such as liver, cabbage and broccoli. Vitamin K helps the blood to clot in order to reduce or stop bleeding.

Why is it important for babies?

Because babies are fed on milk during early infancy, they only get a small amount of vitamin K and a small number of babies suffer from bleeding as a result of this.

What is the benefit of vitamin K supplements?

The benefit of vitamin K supplements is that your baby will get enough vitamin K so the risk of bleeding is reduced.

What are the risks of vitamin K supplements?

Evidence suggests that vitamin K is not harmful. In the 1990's concerns were raised about the possible link between injected vitamin K and childhood cancer, but other studies have not confirmed this. It is not possible to exclude a small increase in the risk of childhood cancer because research is limited but the Department of Health, the Expert Group of Medicines Control Agency and the Committee on Safety of Medicines looked at all the studies and decided that overall the information available does not suggest that there is an increased risk of childhood cancer if vitamin K is given to babies.

What are the risks of not giving vitamin K supplements?

Babies who do not receive vitamin K supplements at birth may, in some rare cases, develop Vitamin K Deficiency Bleeding (VKDB). This is a rare but sometimes fatal disorder which causes babies to bleed from their nose, mouth or into their brain. Of the 800,000 babies born in the UK every year, 10-20 babies could suffer brain damage as a result of VKDB and 4-6 babies could die because of it. Brain damage affects babies differently but the main problems it would cause are learning difficulties and slow development.

Are there any alternatives to giving vitamin K supplements?

There are no alternatives. Giving your baby vitamin K supplements is the only way to ensure your baby has enough vitamin K.

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Which babies are at greater risk of VKDB?

Babies at greater risk of VKDB are those who:

- are born to mothers taking medications such as anti-convulsants (drugs to prevent fits)
- are born prematurely
- have had a difficult birth e.g. ventouse or forceps delivery
- have liver disease or other illnesses
- are unable to take and absorb feeds
- have bled or have bruising at birth

However, it is not possible to identify all babies who may be at risk of bleeding and the bleeding may not always be seen externally. This is why we recommend that all babies have the supplement.

What are the warning signs of VKDB?

Many babies who suffer bleeding in the brain have minor bleeds from the nose, mouth or skin. If your baby has any bleeding or bruising at anytime during the first 6 months of life you should seek medical attention from your GP.

You should also seek medical attention if your baby is jaundiced (yellow tinge to the skin or in whites of the eyes), not gaining weight, is slow to feed or not interested in feeding, has pale stools, is passing dark urine or is ill in any way.

How is the vitamin K supplement given?

Vitamin K supplements can be given by mouth or by injection. Both ways offer protection but the injection is a more effective way of giving vitamin K and is the method most commonly used.

By injection

1 injection is given into baby's leg by the midwife or doctor within the first few hours after birth. It is likely that the baby will cry when they will have the injection, but they will stop very quickly and shouldn't suffer any long term effects as a result of this. The baby only needs one injection.

By mouth

2 or 3 doses are given through a dropper/syringe into your baby's mouth. Babies who are fed artificial milk only need 2 doses because vitamin K is added to the milk, but babies who are exclusively breastfed will need a third dose.

- The first dose is given by the midwife during your baby's first week of life
- You or your partner will need to give the second dose at 7 days old (your midwife will show you how to do this).
- If your baby is breastfed you will need to give the third dose at 28 days old.

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If artificial milk has added vitamin K, should I feed my baby this?

Don't swap to artificial milk because of the added vitamin K. Giving your baby formula milk is not an alternative to giving the supplement. The Department of Health recommends breastfeeding over artificial milk.

Breastfeeding gives babies the best start in life. It provides the right nutrients, growth factors, hormones and immunity which the baby needs for healthy growth and development. Exclusive breastfeeding for the first 4 months gives your baby the best chance of avoiding allergies later on in childhood. Babies who are breastfed for the first 3 months of life are less likely to have an infection in their first year.

Further information

During your pregnancy your midwife will discuss the vitamin K supplement with you and will record whether or not you give consent for your baby to have it. When you come in to give birth the midwife will check this again with you.

If you have any questions or concerns about your baby having a vitamin K supplement please speak to your doctor, midwife or health visitor.

For more information about our hospitals and services please visit our websites www.swbh.nhs.uk or follow us on Twitter @SWBHnhs and Facebook www.facebook.com/SWBHnhs.

You can find more information about pregnancy and childbirth on the maternity pages of our website.

Sources used for the information in this leaflet

- Department of Health, 'Vitamin K for newborn babies', May 1998
- Department of Health, 'Infant feeding recommendation', May 2003

If you would like to suggest any amendments or improvements to this leaflet please contact the communications department on 0121 507 5303 or email: swb-tr.swbh-gm-patient-information@nhs.net



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