

Vitamin K for Newborn Babies

Information for Parents

What is Vitamin K?

- A vitamin that occurs naturally in food.
- It is needed by everyone to help the blood clot properly.

Why do babies need extra vitamin K?

All babies have low levels of vitamin K at birth compared to older children. Rarely, bleeding which may be serious enough to cause brain damage or even death can occur because of low vitamin K levels. Giving vitamin K to babies prevents bleeding and we recommend that it should be given to all babies.

How is vitamin K given?

- By an injection into the leg
- By mouth

Guidelines produced by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) recommend all babies should receive vitamin K and if the parents agree, this should be given by an injection. Only one injection is required and it is given into the leg shortly after birth. If parents do not wish their baby to have an injection NICE recommends vitamin K should be given by mouth but more than one dose will be required.

Are further doses required?

If vitamin K is given by injection shortly after birth no further doses will be needed.

If vitamin K is given by mouth the body is unable to store the vitamin K so further doses are required.

All babies receiving oral vitamin K should receive 2 doses:

- The first dose within 4 hours of being born
- The second dose between 4 and 7 days of age

Breast milk only contains small amounts of vitamin K. Breast-fed babies will therefore need an extra dose of vitamin K when they are between 4 to 6 weeks of age. We would also advise giving another dose of vitamin K if your baby is still receiving only breast milk 4 weeks later at 8 -10 weeks of age.

Bottle-fed babies only need two doses of vitamin K as formula milk contains enough vitamin K to prevent any bleeding. If you stop breast feeding and start bottle feeding only the first 2 doses of vitamin K are needed.

Your Midwife will arrange for any oral doses of vitamin K to be given if needed after you leave hospital.

Breast feeding has many important advantages for you and your baby. We strongly recommend breast feeding if possible. Please do not swap to bottle feeding formula milk just because it has added vitamin K.

Babies at most risk

Babies in the groups listed below are more likely to bleed because of low levels of vitamin K:

- Born by an instrumental or difficult delivery e.g. forceps

- Babies born prematurely
- Babies admitted to the special care baby unit
- Mothers taking certain drugs e.g. drugs to control epilepsy

If your baby is in one of these groups we very strongly recommend you follow the National Guidelines and allow your baby to have vitamin K by injection shortly after birth.

Can vitamin K be harmful?

Some research in 1992 suggested a link between vitamin K given by injection and childhood cancer. Other research, performed after that, has not been able to confirm this link. It is impossible to completely exclude a small increase in the risk of developing childhood leukaemia associated with a vitamin K injection. The National Institute of Health and Care Excellence believe the risk is extremely small and that the risk of harm due to bleeding in a baby who does not receive vitamin K is greater than any possible increased risk of developing leukaemia in the future. The vitamin K we now give by injection is a different preparation to the vitamin K used in 1992. It is important the babies at most risk of bleeding do get their vitamin K by injection.

Konakion MM

This is the preparation used in Devon and by the majority of hospitals in the UK. When given by mouth the manufacturer recommends breast-fed babies receive 3 doses. In Exeter the paediatricians would like to support mothers who wish to continue breast feeding for many weeks. We therefore recommend an extra dose of vitamin K can be given if a baby is still being solely breast-fed 4 weeks after their third oral dose of vitamin K.

Consent

We cannot give your baby vitamin K without your permission. Your midwife will talk to you about vitamin K and ask you to sign a consent form.

More information

Your health visitor and midwife should be able to answer your questions about vitamin K. If you need more information please ask to speak to a paediatrician.

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