

Vitamin K – Information for Parents

The Department of Health recommends that all babies are given a vitamin K supplement at birth, this is also known as Konakion MM. We support this view here, and so all newborn babies are offered a supplement of vitamin K. Administration is only given with consent so please read this leaflet to help you decide if this is right for you and your baby.

What is vitamin K?

Vitamin K is a vitamin which occurs naturally in food and plants. It helps to make blood clot properly in order to prevent bleeding (haemorrhage).

Why is vitamin K offered?

At birth babies only have a small store of vitamin K which is quickly used up in the first few days of life. This may lead to something called 'vitamin K deficiency bleeding' (VKDB). The blood loss can be from the umbilical cord site, nose, and mouth or into the brain, where it is not visible. When it occurs in the brain it may cause brain damage or death. By giving newborns vitamin K babies can be protected against this disorder.

What is the chance of bleeding?

The chance is relatively small. VKDB occurs in approximately one in 2000 full-term, breast-fed babies that have not been given vitamin K at birth. By having vitamin K this small chance is almost eliminated. Once feeding is established the baby gradually builds up its own stores.

How is vitamin K given?

There are two ways of giving vitamin K to your baby:

1. By a single injection into the muscle at the top of the babies thigh soon after birth.
2. By mouth, soon after birth, followed by 2 further separate doses within the first four to six weeks of life. The first dose will be given by the midwife and the following doses will be given by yourselves. The midwife will show you how to do this. The vitamin K and the syringe will be provided for you. It is important that all three doses are given to ensure it is effective. Please write in your baby's red book 'My personal child health record' the dates when further doses are given.

Do I have a choice of how my baby has the vitamin K?

Yes of course and the information below may help you decide

An injection of vitamin K prevents VKDB in virtually all babies, including in exclusively breast feeding babies. The beneficial effect of the injection is that it is effective, easy, it lasts months and it does not need to be repeated. The

- downside is it may cause short lived pain and sometimes bruising.
- Oral vitamin K may be less effective - it is not as well absorbed in the gut in some babies so the protection against bleeding may not be as good as having an injection. It is also unreliable in the dose, for example if your baby vomits or possets soon after being given the vitamin K, it may need to be repeated. There is also the chance that one of the 3 doses gets forgotten, or your baby may be unwell at the recommended time of further dose.

Please note -Breast fed babies with underlying or unsuspected liver disease remain at risk of bleeding despite oral vitamin K.

Do any babies have a greater chance of vitamin K deficiency bleeding than others?

It is not possible to identify all babies who will develop vitamin K deficiency bleeding. However, some babies are known to have a higher chance including those who:

- Are exclusively breast feeding (however the benefits of breast feeding greatly outweigh this small increased risk).
- Are born early i.e. before 37 weeks gestation (these babies may need a smaller dose).
- Are not feeding enough - sometimes known as a 'reluctant feeder'.
- May find it hard to absorb feeds properly – they may have an underlying health problem or an underlying liver disease (that may show as prolonged jaundice).
- Mother is taking certain drugs, such as anti-convulsants.

My baby is exclusively having formula milk does my baby need the vitamin K, as it is already added?

Yes - vitamin K is recommended for **ALL** babies at birth to minimize the chances of bleeding for reason given previously i.e. gut absorption and dosage

Can vitamin K harm my baby?

There are no known side effects from vitamin K.

What happens if I chose for my baby not to have vitamin K offered?

In these circumstances the baby doctors - neonatologist - would like to meet with you to make sure you are fully informed about the small but real chance that your baby may have some bleeding due to vitamin K deficiency, and that this may be severe and sometimes fatal. You will need to be aware of the warning signs of bleeding.

What are the warning signs of vitamin K deficiency bleeding?

- inor bleeds or bruising at any time in the first six months of life -Many babies who later suffer serious bleeding in the brain have had prior small bleeds from the skin, nose or mouth so these babies must be looked at urgently.

M

- ny baby that is still jaundiced (yellow colouring of the skin or whites of the eyes) after two weeks of age should be seen by a doctor or health visitor – this is even more important if they are not gaining weight properly, have pale stools (poo) and dark urine, or are ill in any way.

A

If you have any further questions about vitamin K the Midwives and neonatologists (baby doctors) will be pleased to help.

