

Vitamin K and your newborn baby

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

What is vitamin K? Vitamin K is a substance that is found naturally in the body. It plays an essential role in the normal process of blood clotting.

Why is it important for my baby? Newborn babies have low levels of vitamin K in their blood and occasionally start to bleed. This is called Vitamin K Deficiency Bleeding (VKDB) in newborn babies and used to be called haemorrhagic disease of the newborn, or HDN.

If your baby develops VKDB, in the first few months, he or she may have obvious bleeding:

- from the umbilical stump;
- in the urine;
- from the bottom;
- from the skin and mucous membranes, for example the nose and gums;
- appearing as bruises on the skin
- there is also the risk of internal bleeding, for example inside the head.

Bleeding because of a vitamin K deficiency only occurs in a very small number of babies; approximately one in every 10,000. The impact of VKDB can vary, from being mild to fatal. Approximately 30% of babies with VKDB are left with mental impairment because of bleeding to the brain, and about 7% of babies with VKDB die.

Which babies are most at risk? Babies are more at risk if:

- they were born prematurely (before 37 weeks);
- they were delivered by forceps or caesarean section;
- they are bruised after delivery;
- they had breathing difficulties at birth
- you were on certain drugs during your pregnancy, such as anticonvulsants (medication for epilepsy).
- the baby is a boy who is going to be circumcised.

Babies who are entirely breastfed are more likely to develop VKDB compared to babies that are bottle-fed. This is because manufacturers add vitamin K to formula milk.

Why should my baby be given vitamin K?

Even if your baby is not at a higher risk of developing VKDB, he or she could still develop a vitamin K deficiency. About one third of babies with VKDB do not have any of the risk factors listed above.

VKDB is completely preventable by giving your baby extra vitamin K after he or she is born.

Therefore paediatricians, Department of Health and The National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) strongly recommend that all newborn babies receive vitamin K soon after birth to prevent VKDB until they build up their own supplies.

How is the vitamin K given?

We offer every baby delivered here a dose of vitamin K as soon as possible after birth. NICE recommends injection of vitamin K into a muscle as the best method to give your baby vitamin K.

If you don't want your baby to have the injection, vitamin K can be given by mouth, unless your baby cannot accept feeds by mouth.

Are there any drawbacks to vitamin K supplements?

In the early 1990's it was suggested that vitamin K injections might increase the risk of leukaemia (a type of cancer of the blood) in children. However, since then there have been many more reports disproving this. Current well informed scientific opinion is that there is no link.

Are there any alternatives?

The alternative is not to give vitamin K for the prevention of VKDB. This increases the risk of the baby getting VKDB 10 to 100 fold.

Will further doses be necessary?

As an injection, a single dose of vitamin K is enough.

Given by mouth, 3 doses are necessary:

- the first dose soon after delivery
- a second dose when your baby is around seven days old (given by your midwife); and
- a third dose when your baby is about six weeks old (given by your health visitor or GP).

If you are bottle feeding your baby formula milk, he or she will only need the first 2 doses, as vitamin K is added to all formula milk. However, although formula milk contains higher levels of vitamin K than breast milk, this is not a reason to bottle feed your baby. Breast feeding is always the best choice for your baby.

This plan also follows the recommendations of the Royal College of Paediatrics, Child Health and NICE.

Does my baby have to be given vitamin K?

As a parent you have the right to refuse. However, we strongly encourage you to allow your baby to have this simple treatment, which lowers the risk of death or permanent handicap in a healthy baby. If you do not wish your baby to have vitamin K please discuss this with your midwife or Paediatrician in order to get further information before making your decision

Further information

If you would like further information or have any questions about vitamin K and your baby please speak to your midwife or contact the **hospital birth centre on 020 7188 6867**

PALS. To make comments or raise concerns about the Trust's services, please contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS). Ask a member of staff to direct you to PALS or call **020 7188 8801** at St Thomas' or **020 7188 8803** at Guy's. Email **pals@gstt.nhs.uk**

Language Support Services. If you need an interpreter or information about the care you are receiving in the language or format of your choice, please call **020 7188 8815**, fax **020 7188 5953** or email **languagesupport@gstt.nhs.uk**

Knowledge & Information Centre (KIC): For more information about health conditions, support groups and local services, or to search the internet and send emails, please visit the KIC on the Ground Floor, North Wing, St Thomas' Hospital. Call **020 7188 3416**, email **kic@gstt.nhs.uk** or visit **www.kic.gstt.nhs.uk**

NHS Direct offers health information and advice from a specially trained nurse over the phone 24 hours a day. Call **0845 4647** or visit **www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk**