



## Maternity Unit

# Vitamin K for your Baby

The Department of Health recommends that, following birth, all newborn babies are given a vitamin K supplement. This is to avoid the rare, but serious (and sometimes fatal), disorder called Vitamin K Deficiency Bleeding (VKDB). This leaflet has been designed to help you decide whether you wish your baby to receive this supplementation.

The paediatricians in this hospital strongly recommend you protect your baby with a one-off injection of vitamin K. This is given shortly after birth and prevents VKDB.

### What is Vitamin K?

Vitamin K is a vitamin occurring naturally in foods, for example vegetables and liver. Vitamin K is needed for the normal clotting of blood in order to prevent bleeding.

### 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 in newborn babies.

If your baby develops VKDB in the first few months, they may show signs of obvious bleeding:

- from their umbilical stump
- in their urine
- from their bottom
- from their skin and mucus membranes, for example their nose and gums
- This can also appear as bruising on the skin
- There is also a risk of internal bleeding, for example inside their head

Bleeding because of vitamin K deficiency only occurs in a very small number of newborn babies, approximately 1 in every 10,000. The impact of VKDB can be mild, or in rare cases, 7 in 100 babies with VKDB, can lead to death. Approximately 30 out of 100 babies with VKDB are left with mental impairment because of bleeding to the brain.

## **Which babies are most at risk?**

Bleeding happens unpredictably in some babies, and it is not possible to identify babies as high risk or low risk with absolute certainty. The range of risk factors is broad, but in some babies without risk factors, bleeding occurs for unknown reasons in the first few weeks of life and, of the babies who do suffer bleeding, about a quarter have no evident risk factor.

Babies are more at risk if:

- they are born prematurely (before 37 weeks)
- they had a complicated birth - forceps, ventouse (vacuum extraction) or caesarean section
- they have a mother taking certain drugs, such as anti-convulsants for epilepsy
- baby is bruised after birth
- baby is ill for any other reason

Babies who are entirely breastfed are more likely to develop VKBD compared to babies that are bottle-fed. This is because manufacturers add vitamin K to formula milk. Although formula milk contains higher levels of vitamin K than breastmilk, this is not a reason to bottle feed your baby. Breastfeeding is usually the best choice for your baby.

## **How is Vitamin K given?**

The best method of giving your baby vitamin K is an injection soon after the birth. The injection is given by a midwife into the muscle of your baby's thigh. If you do not wish your baby to have the injection, vitamin K can be given orally.

If you choose the injection, your baby will only require it once.

The regime for oral doses:

- For breastfed babies, there will be one dose given at birth and then 1 dose weekly for the next 11 weeks (12 weeks in total)
- For formula fed babies there will be 1 dose at birth
- For breastfed babies who change over to formula within the first 3 months, the first dose will be at birth, then weekly doses until change over to formula milk occurs.

## **Can Vitamin K be harmful?**

No. Some studies in the early 1990's raised concerns over a possible link between giving vitamin K and childhood cancers. A careful review of data from the UK Children's Cancer Study group in 2003 showed that vitamin K administration does not influence the risk of children developing any form of cancer.

## Is there an alternative?

The alternative is not to give your baby vitamin K. In this circumstance, the risk of bleeding is increased and you will need to be aware of the warning signs of VKDB.

We hope that you have found this information useful. If you have any questions or are worried about anything, please speak to the following Dorset County Hospital Staff:-

Maternity Unit at Dorset County Hospital - 01305 254245

## About this leaflet:

Author:	Gemma Westaway – Postnatal Coordinator
Written:	October 2009
Updated & Approved:	April 2020
Review date:	April 2023
Edition:	2

If you have feedback regarding the accuracy of the information contained in this leaflet, or if you would like a list of references used to develop this leaflet, please email [pals@dchft.nhs.uk](mailto:pals@dchft.nhs.uk)



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