

Information for Patients

Vitamin K for newborn babies

There are many problems which parents are faced with during pregnancy and bringing up a child. This leaflet gives you some information and advice about a rare but preventable problem with bleeding in babies caused by a lack of vitamin K. Your midwife will be happy to talk about this if you are worried or need further information.

What are the benefits of giving vitamin K to babies?

Newborn babies are born with low levels of vitamin K, which the body needs to help the blood clot. A small amount of vitamin K is found in human breast milk and the manufacturers of bottled baby milks have added larger amounts to these products.

In the past, a small number of healthy babies developed problems with bleeding because they did not have enough vitamin K. This caused bruising of the skin, and bleeding from the umbilicus and after circumcision. Sometimes more serious problems occurred with bleeding into the bowel or brain. The risk of serious bleeding is increased if babies are premature or very ill, or if they develop liver problems.

It has been shown that if healthy babies are routinely given extra vitamin K after birth, the risk of serious bleeding almost completely disappears. Over the last 30 years, the risk of death or brain damage from this problem has been drastically reduced by giving all newborn babies extra vitamin K shortly after birth. If vitamin K is not given to healthy newborn babies, then 1 child in every 20,000 is likely to develop severe problems with bleeding at a later stage, including brain damage or even death. This risk is higher amongst breast fed babies than among bottle fed babies.

How is vitamin K given?

Vitamin K can either be given in one of two ways:

- **By injection**

An injection is usually given shortly after birth into the thigh muscle and does not cause any lasting discomfort to the baby. Only one injection is needed.

- **By mouth**

Vitamin K can also be given by mouth: the midwife or doctor will measure the dose using a syringe and the medicine will be dripped into the baby's mouth. All of these babies need a second dose at seven days of life and breast-fed babies will need a third dose at twenty eight days of life to give maximum protection against bleeding.

Vitamin K given by mouth has been shown to be less effective at preventing bleeding than vitamin K given by injection.

Despite the lower amounts of vitamin K found in breast milk, breast-feeding remains the healthiest way to feed your baby.

Are there any risks to my baby?

In 1990 doctors researching the causes of childhood cancer studied some aspects of pregnancy and childbirth in two UK maternity hospitals. They found a higher risk of childhood cancer and Leukaemia in babies who had received vitamin K by injection, compared to those given it by mouth. However, since then many doctors have disagreed with these results and there has been no link between vitamin K injections and childhood cancer reported from any other country in the world. A group of British experts recently agreed that the first results could have happened simply by chance.

Very occasionally, some local irritation may occur at the injection site. This should resolve on its own.

What does Saint Mary's Hospital recommend?

The consultants, midwives and pharmacists at Saint Mary's Hospital recommend that all newborn babies should receive a dose of vitamin K by injection shortly after birth.

We believe that injected vitamin K is safe and effective. Vitamin K by mouth has not been proven to give the same protection against bleeding. However, if parents do choose this option, then we will give the first dose in hospital and arrange for further doses to be given at home.

Premature or ill babies have a much higher risk of bleeding and will need to be given the **injection** of vitamin K as an essential part of their treatment if they are admitted to the Neonatal Unit. This will be discussed with you by a member of Neonatal Medical/Surgical team.

What happens after I take my baby home?

We will tell your family doctor (GP) and midwife which type of vitamin K your baby receives. If your baby is given the injection then no further treatment is needed at home.

If your baby has been given the medicine by mouth, the midwife will give another dose at one week of age to all babies and, for breastfed babies, a third dose at one month. When you leave hospital you will be given a special pack containing two doses of vitamin K medicine, which you should keep in a safe place, preferable somewhere which should be dry and away from sunlight.

Remember - Bleeding caused by lack of vitamin K is very rare in healthy babies. However, it is best to decide before the birth whether you want your baby to be given vitamin K by mouth or by injection, so that your baby can be protected from bleeding as soon as possible afterwards.

If you have any questions or remain unsure, then your midwife or a children's doctor (paediatrician) will be happy to talk to you.