

Vitamin K

Information sheet

What is Vitamin K (also called Konakion)?

Vitamin K is a natural substance made by the body that is important in blood clotting (stopping bleeding). Adults make vitamin K from the bacteria in their guts, and ingest vitamin K by eating cereals and green vegetables. A mature liver is able to make additional factors which help the blood to clot normally.

Babies, however, do not have any bacteria in their gut yet, they can't eat the same foods as adults, and their immature liver may not be able to make enough of these other factors to help the blood clot. Doctors recommend giving your baby an injection of vitamin K shortly after birth to cover the period until normal bacteria take over the production. It is given as a one-off injection into the baby's thigh.

Why does my baby need an injection?

Vitamin K helps blood to clot properly and without it babies are at risk of bleeding, which could be potentially very serious. Vitamin K can't cross the placenta, so when babies are born they will have very low levels. Neither breast nor formula milk contain enough vitamin K to help the clotting system in babies.

The injection will help prevent a rare but serious and potentially fatal condition called vitamin K deficiency bleeding (VKDB). This can cause bleeding from the baby's gums or belly button, or bleeding which happens internally, such as from the gut. In the most severe cases there can be a bleed on the brain. Although this is very rare, the consequences can be severe, with 30-50% of babies with a brain bleed suffering brain damage or death.

Are there alternatives to an injection?

There is an oral form of vitamin K available, but it may be less effective. Babies will need 2-3 doses: one at birth, one between day 4 and 7 of life, and if the baby is being breastfed an additional dose at 1 month of age. There is also concern that it may not be fully absorbed, for example, if the baby vomits. It is very important that the baby gets all the appropriate doses, as research has shown one dose doesn't work. Scientists and doctors are still doing research to see if oral vitamin K works as well as the injection.

I read that vitamin K can lead to long term health problems. Is this true?

No. The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) recommend all babies get vitamin K, after reviewing all the appropriate evidence.

What if I don't want my baby to have vitamin K?

Paediatric doctors in the UK would recommend that your baby gets an injection of vitamin K after birth. If you don't want your baby to have the injection then you will be offered oral vitamin K as an alternative. You are, of course, allowed to refuse any vitamin K for your baby, but this would be going against current medical advice.

Please ask to speak to a midwife or doctor if you have any questions or concerns.