York and Scarborough Teaching Hospitals
NHS Foundation Trust

Vitamin K

Information for patients, relatives and carers

ⓘ For more information, please contact:
Your Community Midwife or the Maternity Ward Clerk

York Hospital
Wigginton Road, York, YO31 8HE
Telephone: 01904 726869

Scarborough Hospital
Woodlands Drive, Scarborough, YO12 6QL
Telephone: 01904 726869

The Department of Health recommends that all newborn babies be given Vitamin K supplement at birth. This is to avoid the rare, but serious and sometimes fatal disorder, Vitamin K deficiency bleeding (VKDB).

What is Vitamin K deficiency bleeding?

It is a rare disorder that can occur in newborn babies, leading to bleeding from the nose, mouth or into the brain. Your baby may bleed inside so it is not always possible to see the bleeding. When it occurs in the brain it may cause brain damage or even death. The risk is small, but of the 80 000 births recorded in the UK every year, 10 to 20 babies could be damaged or die as a result of bleeding into the brain.

What is Vitamin K?

Vitamin K is a vitamin that occurs naturally in food, especially liver and some vegetables. We all need Vitamin K to help make our blood clot and prevent bleeding. During early infancy when fed solely on milk, babies have very little Vitamin K. By giving babies sufficient extra Vitamin K, the risk of bleeding is effectively removed.

What do I need to consider in pregnancy?

- Whether or not you would like Vitamin K to be given to your baby.

- If you do, whether it is given by injection or by mouth.

Most babies born within York and Scarborough Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust are given an injection in the first hours following birth.

If you choose for your baby to be given the injection, only one dose at birth will be required. The injection is given into the baby's thigh. Intramuscular injection prevents Vitamin K deficiency bleeding in virtually all babies.

You may, however, prefer your baby to be given Vitamin K by mouth. The first dose will be given by the midwife shortly after birth but will need to be repeated, as it is not as effective in a one-off dose as an injection.

There is overwhelming evidence that breast milk is the best source of nutrients for babies in the first six months of life. The only reason that babies who are breast fed are at greater risk of Vitamin K deficiency is that Vitamin K is added to artificial milk.

It is recommended that if you choose to breast feed your baby and have chosen for your baby to have Vitamin K by mouth; your baby will receive Vitamin K at birth, day five and at four weeks.

Please consider your favoured route of administration and ideally continue with this method for the full length of the course. If you do decide after one dose by mouth that you wish for your baby to have an injection, please discuss this with your midwife or paediatrician.

You may wish to discuss further doses with your health professional.

If you are bottle-feeding and choose to give your baby Vitamin K by mouth, only one further dose is recommended at five days. This is because Vitamin K is added to formula milk, however, the **Department of Health recommends breast-feeding over bottle-feeding**.

Follow up doses will be given to you to take home prior to discharge from hospital.

Can Vitamin K be harmful?

The experts advise that the evidence suggests that it is not harmful. Concerns were raised by a study in the early 1990s that possibly linked giving Vitamin K by injection with childhood cancers. However other larger studies have not confirmed this.

In 1997 a joint expert group of Medicines Control Agency, the Committee on Safety of Medicines and the Department of Health considered all the studies. Although it is impossible to exclude a small increase in leukaemia due to limitations of the research data, the experts concluded that the available data did not support an increased risk of cancer, including leukaemia, caused by Vitamin K.

Why give Vitamin K to all babies?

Bleeding can occur unpredictably, and it is not always possible to identify high-risk babies. Of the babies who suffer bleeding, about a quarter have no evident risk factors.

Babies at greater risk

- Babies whose mothers are on certain drugs such as anticonvulsants.
- Prematurity.
- Liver disease, i.e. prolonged jaundice, pale stools, dark urine.
- Failure to take or find it hard to absorb feeds.
- Are ill for other reasons.
- Have bleeding or spontaneous bruising in early infancy.

As parents you may decide that your baby should not receive Vitamin K or may prefer a modified course. In these circumstances the risk of bleeding is increased, and parents must be aware of the warning signs of VKBD.

You may wish to discuss this leaflet more fully with your doctor, midwife or health visitor.

Reference

Department of Health (2002) Vitamin K Information for parents to be, HMSO.
www.medicines.org.uk/emc

Further information

www.bmj.com

www.womens-health.co.uk

www.dh.gov.uk

Tell us what you think of this leaflet

We hope that you found this leaflet helpful. If you would like to tell us what you think, please contact:
Clinical Governance:
yhs-tr.patientsafetymidwives@nhs.net

Teaching, training and research

Our Trust is committed to teaching, training and research to support the development of health and healthcare in our community. Healthcare students may observe consultations for this purpose. You can opt out if you do not want students to observe. We may also ask you if you would like to be involved in our research.

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

PALS offers impartial advice and assistance to patients, their relatives, friends and carers. We can listen to feedback (positive or negative), answer questions and help resolve any concerns about Trust services.

PALS can be contacted on 01904 726262, or email yhs-tr.patientexperienceteam@nhs.net.

An answer phone is available out of hours.

Leaflets in alternative languages or formats

If you would like this information in a different format, including braille or easy read, or translated into a different language, please speak to a member of staff in the ward or department providing your care.

Patient Information Leaflets can be accessed via the Trust's Patient Information Leaflet website: www.yorkhospitals.nhs.uk/your-visit/patient-information-leaflets/

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