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VITAMIN K

THIS LEAFLET EXPLAINS
WHAT VITAMIN K IS, AND
ITS IMPORTANCE IN
PREVENTING BLEEDING
PROBLEMS IN NEWBORN
BABIES

IF YOU WOULD
LIKE FURTHER
INFORMATION TO SUPPORT
YOUR DECISION
MAKING, PLEASE CONTACT
YOUR NAMED MIDWIFE

What is vitamin K?

Vitamin K occurs naturally in food (especially red meat and some green vegetables). It is also produced by friendly bacteria in our gut. We all need it as it helps to make our blood clot and to prevent bleeding problems. All babies are born with low levels of vitamin K. As babies mature and feed well, they begin to produce their own supply of vitamin K from natural bacteria found in their bowel. They can also get a small amount of vitamin K from their mother's breast milk and it is added to formula milk.

How do low levels of vitamin K affect a newborn baby?

A very small number of babies suffer bleeding problems due to a shortage of vitamin K. This is called Vitamin K Deficiency Bleeding (or VKBD) for short. A classical form of VKBD usually happens around the first week of life. The baby may bleed from the mouth or nose or from the stump around the umbilical cord. Late onset VKBD is a more serious problem which happens after the baby is about three weeks old. The bleeding is sometimes into the gut or the brain and in some cases it can cause brain damage or even death.

How can Vitamin K Deficient Bleeding be prevented?

The Department of Health, the Welsh Government, NICE and the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health recommend that all newborn babies are given vitamin K to reduce the chances of dangerous internal bleeding. The most effective treatment is a single dose of vitamin K injected into the thigh muscle shortly after birth. Vitamin K by mouth is also effective in most cases but your baby will need to have a number of doses in the first month of life. Vitamin K by mouth is not advised for high risk, sick or premature babies. Vegan vitamin K is also available to give your baby by mouth. For a small number of babies, vitamin K may not be effective when given by mouth. This may be because the baby has difficulty absorbing the vitamin or if the baby vomits after the baby has been given vitamin K.

Are some babies at a higher risk of Vitamin K Deficient Bleeding?

Babies who are thought to be at a higher risk include those who:

- are premature
- had a complicated birth requiring the use of forceps or ventouse, where bruising has taken place
- have liver disease
- cannot absorb fat-soluble vitamins due to diarrhoea, coeliac disease or cystic fibrosis
- are babies of mothers taking anti-convulsant medications
- are babies of mothers with significant liver disease

It is impossible to identify all babies who will definitely be high risk. 1 in every 4 babies who develop VKBD have none of the problems above.



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What is the risk?

VKBD occurs in one in every 8,500 full term babies if no vitamin K supplement is given. In the whole of the UK, if no vitamin K was given, 10 to 20 of the 800,000 babies born each year might be brain damaged as a result of a bleed into the brain, and five babies would die of this condition.

Can vitamin K be harmful?

A concern was expressed in the early 1990s that there was a link between vitamin K supplements and leukaemia or other cancers. A careful review of the data from the UK Children's Cancer Study Group in 2003 found no evidence to support this.

When do I need to start thinking about this?

During your pregnancy you should consider whether your baby should receive vitamin K, and if so, how it should be given. Vitamin K for your baby should be given as soon as possible after birth. If you would like your baby to have vegan vitamin K by mouth, please let your midwife know in your pregnancy so the vitamin K can be ordered ready for your baby.

What if I say no to vitamin K for my baby?

Parents of healthy term babies have the option to decline to give their baby Vitamin K. Following birth, a midwife and a neonatologist (baby doctor) will offer to explore with you the reasons why you may wish to decline to give your baby vitamin K. They will support you to ensure that you have the correct information for your decision making.

Further information

If you would like further information to support your decision making, please contact your named midwife

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