

# Vitamin K and your baby

Department of Maternity

Information for Patients

Produced: December 2023

Review: December 2026

Leaflet number: 1453 Version: 1

## What is Vitamin K?

Vitamin K helps blood to clot (stops bleeding). In adults vitamin K is made in the stomach from green vegetables and natural bacteria found in the body. Low levels of vitamin K can make the blood clot more slowly than normal. This results in bleeding more than we would normally expect.

## Vitamin K and babies

We know from research, all new born babies have low levels of vitamin K. These fall even lower during the 1st few days of life.

## Why does this happen?

Newborn babies:

- do not have fully developed liver cells
- have no bacteria in the stomach to make vitamin K
- get only small amounts of vitamin K during feeding, although colostrum (the 1st milk) has high levels of vitamin K.
- are not able to store vitamin K for long periods
- use up vitamin K very quickly. This causes the levels to drop to low levels in a short period of time

Very low levels of vitamin K in a baby causes a condition known as vitamin K deficiency bleeding (VKDB). Bleeding may be slight (bruises, nose bleeds, blood in the stools, oozing after the new born blood spot screening test), but may be so serious as to cause a disability or death (such as serious bleeding from the baby's cord, or bleeding inside the baby's brain).

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Bleeding can happen at different stages during the first 6 months of life.

- Early VKDB happens during the 1st week of life
- Late VKDB happens when infants are 2 to 12 weeks of age. Late VKDB happens almost only in breast fed infants, who do not get vitamin K at birth.

## What are the main risk factors for VKDB?

### Pre-term birth

The blood vessels of pre-term babies are more fragile, if damaged, they will bleed. Preterm babies may have other issues which can cause problems with feeding. This limits the amount of vitamin K they get from their diet.

### Traumatic birth

Breech, ventouse, forceps or caesarean births do not cause a lack of vitamin K. Babies who suffer any trauma, are more likely to come to harm if their blood cannot clot properly.

### Women/birthing people who take certain medications

Certain drugs can make it difficult for blood to clot. Women/birthing people

- with epilepsy taking Carbamazepine, Phenytoin or Phenobarbitone,
- who are being treated for tuberculosis,

need to discuss vitamin K protection for their baby with their health professional.

### Liver disease

Babies born with a liver disorder are not able to produce bile salts. This is an essential substance which is important for the absorption of vitamin K from their milk feeds.

## Does this happen to all babies?

A recent British survey found that early vitamin K deficiency bleeding happens in 1.62 in every 100,000 live babies born in the UK each year. Late vitamin K deficiency bleeding has been reported to vary from 4.4 to 10.5 in every 100,000 live babies born in the UK.

## How can I protect my baby?

Research have shown that VKDB can be prevented by giving all newborn babies a supplement of vitamin K on the first day of life. Babies can be protected by 1 of the following:

1. Having 1 injection of 1mg of vitamin K within 24 hours of birth. This will be given by the hospital, birth centre or home birth team midwives.



2. Having 2mg drops of vitamin K into the mouth of at birth. All babies having the mouth drops will have a 2nd dose at 4 to 7 days of age. If your baby is bottle fed they will not need any more doses. If your baby is breast fed they will need a 3rd dose at 28 days of age. The 1st dose will be given by the hospital, birth centre or home birth team midwives. The 2nd dose will be given from the hospital or by the homebirth team. This depends on where you had your baby. They will be given by a midwife on the day 5 weight check. If your baby needs a 3rd dose, it will need prescribing by the GP and given to your health visitor.

### Which method is best for my baby?

Based on the Leicestershire District guidelines, infants should get 1 injection of vitamin K, within the first 24 hours of birth. We ask that you decide during pregnancy if you wish to give your infant vitamin K, because consent is needed shortly after the baby is born.

### Can vitamin K harm my baby?

A 1992 British study raised concerns about a possible link between vitamin K injections and childhood cancer. Later, larger research in Sweden and Canada were unable to find such proof. Based on the best available research, by experts from the Medicines Control Agency, the Committee of Safety, and the Department of Health, vitamin K is not known to raise the risk of cancer, even leukaemia.

### More information

If you would like more information about vitamin K and your baby, please talk to your midwife, health visitor or paediatrician.

### Contact details

If you have any concerns, please contact the Community Midwives Office on 0116 2584834.

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