

Vitamin K (Konakion)

Information for parents

This guide is to explain the reasons for National Women's Health recommending vitamin K injections for newborn infants.

Why does my baby need a Vitamin K injection?

Vitamin K deficiency bleeding is a rare but serious form of bleeding that can occur in babies from the first week of life to two months of age. Bleeding can occur into the brain and from the gut or other body sites. It can be very severe, even life threatening or cause permanent brain damage. Without treatment, this can occur in up to 1% to 2% of babies. Fortunately, this type of bleeding can be completely prevented by giving a muscular injection of Vitamin K at birth. This treatment is recommended for all babies.

Vitamin K is needed to make the clotting factors that the body uses to prevent bleeding and blood loss. All babies have low levels of Vitamin K at birth and in some babies levels are low enough to cause bleeding. Because it is not possible to tell if a baby is at risk of bleeding at birth, Vitamin K is recommended for all babies. Once a baby is a few months old they start making their own Vitamin K.

What are the benefits?

A single muscular injection of Vitamin K at birth has been proven to prevent both early ("classical") and late Vitamin K deficiency bleeding.

In some special cases a baby may require additional doses for full protection, such as with liver disease or if a mum has been on medications that affect Vitamin K, for example, epilepsy drugs. Your doctor will advise if this is needed.

What are the risks?

Redness or swelling at the injection site can occur but is very uncommon.

One early study suggested that Vitamin K injections may be associated with a very small increased risk of cancer in childhood, but numerous other studies have shown that Vitamin K is not linked to cancer. Vitamin K is considered safe for all babies.

Are there any alternatives to Vitamin K injection?

The only way to prevent serious Vitamin K deficiency bleeding in babies is to give Vitamin K from birth. Oral Vitamin K is an alternative to a muscular injection but multiple oral doses must be given for several months. There is concern that oral Vitamin K is less effective at preventing Vitamin K deficiency bleeding in babies, particularly after the first week. The best way to prevent both early and late Vitamin K deficiency bleeding is to give a single muscular injection shortly after birth. Oral Vitamin K is not suitable for babies who are sick or need an operation.

If you have any concerns about the Vitamin K injection, please discuss this with your doctor or lead maternity carer. The consequences of not giving Vitamin K at birth can be very severe and Vitamin K deficiency bleeding is easily prevented by giving Vitamin K.

This leaflet provides a guide only. If you have concerns or want more information about your baby, ask the doctor or nurse providing your baby's care.