Vitamin K – advice for when your baby doesn't receive this at birth

the women's
the royal women's hospital

In Australia, recommendations are that all babies get vitamin K at birth. If you decide not to give vitamin K to your baby, they can develop bleeding problems. This fact sheet explains what signs to look out for and what to do if your baby becomes unwell.

Why is vitamin K important for your baby?

Vitamin K helps the blood to clot and prevents serious bleeding.

Newborn babies only have very small amounts of vitamin K in their bodies. They do not get enough vitamin K during pregnancy or from feeding after birth.

If your baby has not had vitamin K at birth, they can develop vitamin K deficiency bleeding, or VKDB. This can lead to bleeding in your baby's brain and cause brain damage or even death.

We can prevent VKDB by giving babies vitamin K at birth. The usual method is a single injection, which works very well.

It can also be given as three doses by mouth over the first month of life. Babies don't absorb this as well, so it isn't as reliable as the injection.

You can see if your baby has received vitamin K by checking their care summary or green book (*My Health, Learning and Development Record*).

What should you look out for?

If your baby has not received vitamin K at birth, it is important to look for signs of bleeding, however small.

Babies who have serious bleeding in the brain will often have small bleeds from the nose, mouth or skin first.

This can look like:

- bleeding from the site of any injection or heel prick blood test
- bleeding from their gums (in the mouth)
- bleeding from their cord stump
- blood in their nappy, poo, or wee
- blood in their vomit
- bruising in the first 6 months of life.

You should also see your doctor if:

- your baby is irritable, vomiting and/or paler than usual
  - for babies with darker skin, check the colour of their gums
- your baby is 3 weeks or older and still has jaundice (yellow colouring of the skin or whites of the eyes)
  - jaundice may mean your baby has problems with their liver, which increases the chance of bleeding.

Other signs include:

- changes in the size or shape of the soft spot on your baby's head
- pale stools (poo)
- dark urine (wee)
- poor weight gain.

If your baby has any early signs of bleeding, you should see a doctor straight away. Early treatment may help prevent more serious bleeding.

However, the best way to prevent VKDB is to give vitamin K at birth.

What should you do?

If you notice any bleeding, come to the emergency department of your nearest hospital. You should press on any area that is bleeding. If there is a lot of blood, call 000.

Tell any health care provider that your baby has not had vitamin K. This is important before any vaccination or procedure (such as a heel prick blood test or tongue-tie release).

If your baby is not feeding well, we recommend giving them vitamin K, as this can increase their risk of bleeding.

If you would like your baby to get vitamin K, please ask your local doctor. Your baby can get vitamin K at any time.

For more information

On the Women's website

https://www.thewomens.org.au/health-information/pregnancy-and-birth/after-your-baby-is-born/tests-and-medicines-for-newborn-babies

National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC)

Fact sheet (including translations):
Vitamin K for newborn babies - information for parents
https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/about-us/resources/vitamin-k-newborn-babies-information-parents

Do you need an interpreter?

You can ask for an interpreter if you need one.

Family Violence Support

1800 Respect National Helpline

You can get help if you have experienced sexual assault, domestic or family violence and abuse.
You can call any time of day or night.
1800 737 732
1800respect.org.au

Disclaimer: This fact sheet provides general information only. For specific advice about your or your baby's healthcare needs, you should seek advice from your health professional. The Royal Women's Hospital does not accept any responsibility for loss or damage arising from your reliance on this fact sheet instead of seeing a health professional. If you or your baby require urgent medical attention, please contact your nearest emergency department.
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