

Informed Choice - Vitamin K

Vitamin K is needed by the body to produce factors essential for blood clotting. Low levels of this vitamin can result in Vitamin K Deficiency Bleeding.

Adults receive Vitamin K from foods like leafy green vegetables, and cooking oils and a small amount is made by bacteria in the gut. Vitamin K does not cross the placenta easily, so babies are born with low levels of this vitamin, and they do not get the recommended amount of Vitamin K from breastmilk and formula. A baby's gut is sterile at birth and so they do not create their own vitamin K. Without extra vitamin K it takes about one month for babies to build up enough vitamin K to be protected from this bleeding problem.

Vitamin K Deficiency Bleeding is a rare problem today because most babies receive a dose of the vitamin at birth. Without any extra vitamin K, 4-17 of 1000 babies would be affected between day 2-10 of life and 4 -10 out 100 000 babies between 2 -12 weeks. Babies who are at increased risk for this disease include those who are premature, had difficult births, have liver damage or whose mothers take anti-seizure or anti-clotting medications. A baby with Vitamin K Deficiency Bleeding may bleed from the umbilical stump, nose, skin, scalp and may have bleeding into the abdomen or the brain. In severe cases babies can have a permanent disability or even die.

A prophylactic injection of 1 mg of Vitamin K into the thigh of a newborn baby helps prevent severe bleeding in the first six weeks of life. There are no proven risks of giving this vitamin to healthy babies. Please ask your midwife if any questions about Vitamin K.