

## **Injections for newborn babies - why they're important**

Parents need to know about two injections for newborn babies. One is an injection of a special vitamin (vitamin K). This helps prevent a rare, but serious disorder called Vitamin K Deficiency Bleeding (or VKDB). The other injection immunises babies against a liver disease, hepatitis B. Babies can have both injections in hospital after they're born. Injections in public hospitals are free.

### **Why do babies need vitamin K?**

Without enough vitamin K, new babies risk getting VKDB. This can cause serious bleeding which may involve the brain.

### **Do all new babies need vitamin K?**

Yes. Newborn babies may not have enough vitamin K in their bodies to prevent VKDB. But by six months of age, they usually build up their own supply.

### **Is vitamin K always given by injection?**

It can be given by injection or by mouth. An injection is more convenient because it's one dose only and lasts for months.

Babies need the injection if:

- they're premature or sick
- their mothers took medication in pregnancy for epilepsy, blood clots or TB. (Tell your doctor or midwife if you take any of these medications).

Vitamin K can be given by mouth but the effect does not last as long. It means the baby needs three separate doses:

- at birth
- at three or five days after birth
- at four weeks of age

### **NOTE:**

This third dose is very important for parents to remember! Without it, the baby may not be fully protected.

Any dose must also be repeated if the baby vomits.

### **Does vitamin K have side effects?**

Vitamin K has been given to babies in Australia since 1980 and Australian health authorities believe vitamin K injections are safe. Although one study suggested a link between vitamin K injections and childhood cancer, six other studies have found no link.

### **Must I agree to give my baby vitamin K?**

It's your choice. But doctors strongly advise all babies have vitamin K. This includes babies who are sick or having surgery (including circumcision). Parents who decide against vitamin K should look out for any symptoms of VKDB. These include:

- unexplained bleeding or bruising
- any yellowing of the skin or whites of the eyes after three weeks of age.

Babies with these symptoms should see a doctor (even if they've had vitamin K).

### **Why do babies need hepatitis B immunisation?**

Hepatitis B is a serious disease caused by a virus affecting the liver. Some people with this virus may have no symptoms or only mild symptoms. But up to 25 per cent of people affected may get serious liver disease later in life, especially if they caught hepatitis B as children. Immunisation helps prevent this.

### **How is hepatitis B spread?**

The virus lives in body fluids (blood, saliva and semen). Babies whose mothers have hepatitis B have a very high risk of being infected with the disease at birth.

Other ways in which hepatitis B can be spread are

- if blood from an infected person comes into contact with your blood. This includes: contact through cuts or scratches; contact with contaminated needles or syringes when injecting drugs; contact with contaminated instruments such as those used for body piercing
- through sexual contact with an infected person

### **Why immunise babies at birth?**

It's important to start hepatitis B immunisation as soon as possible after birth to make sure that the immunisation is as effective as possible. Babies need three further hepatitis B injections - at two months, four months and six or 12 months of age. They are given with other routine childhood immunisations.

### **Must my baby be immunised?**

It's your choice, but health authorities strongly advise it.

### **Do hepatitis B injections cause problems?**

Serious side effects are rare. The most common problems are soreness where the injection was given, mild fever and joint pain. See your doctor if you're concerned.

If you need help making phone calls in English, ring the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) on 131 450.

Telephone numbers are correct at time of publication but are not continually updated. You may need to check the numbers in the telephone directory.

You can find more health information in your language on the Multicultural Communication website at <http://mhcs.health.nsw.gov.au>