



SOME TIPS FOR PATIENTS ON WARFARIN

Does warfarin have side effects other than bleeding?

On rare occasions it can cause serious damage to skin tissue. This usually occurs shortly after commencing the warfarin and is associated with blackening of an area of skin followed by ulceration. See your doctor immediately if this happens. Some people notice that warfarin causes thinning of the hair and very occasionally hair loss (alopecia). Allergic skin reactions have also been reported, but are unusual.

Can I take other medication while I'm on warfarin?

You must check with your doctor first. Many commonly used drugs, such as aspirin, antacids, laxatives, antibiotics and antihistamines, can interfere with warfarin, as can some vitamins. In most cases you will be able to take other medication but you may need to have your INR checked more frequently to see if the dosage of warfarin needs to be changed. The same applies whenever you stop taking a medication, so always notify your doctor either way.



Tell your dentist, any new doctor, pharmacists and other health care providers that you are taking warfarin. It is also a good idea to carry an identification card with your doctor's name and telephone number, as well as the dose of warfarin you are taking.

What about alcohol?

Small regular amounts of alcohol usually do not alter your response to warfarin provided your dietary habit does not change. Excessive or binge drinking must be avoided.

Is it safe to take warfarin during pregnancy?

No, warfarin can cause severe birth defects. Women who are taking warfarin should not become pregnant. If you are on warfarin and think you are pregnant or at risk of becoming pregnant, talk to your doctor immediately.

How do I take warfarin?

Warfarin must be taken in the exact dosage prescribed. If you take too much, bleeding may result. If you take too little, you may not be protected against blood clots. Take warfarin at the same time each day to keep the level of the medication in your blood as consistent as possible. If you forget to take a dose you can take it later, as long as you remember to do so within 8 hours of the time you normally take the medication. If it is more than 8 hours, call your doctor if possible to get further advice. Do not double up on your dose if you realise you have missed a dose the day before. You can take warfarin with any fluid. You can crush the tablets if you find it makes them easier to swallow or even mix them into a flavoured drink. Warfarin must be stored in a cool dry place.

Remember

- Report any abnormal bleeding
- Take warfarin at the same time each day
- Attend blood tests as requested
- Do not run out of warfarin
- Avoid binge use of alcohol
- Avoid contact sports
- Keep diet consistent
- Let other health professionals know you are taking warfarin, eg dentist, surgeon etc
- Do not take warfarin during pregnancy or when planning a pregnancy
- Check any new medication with your doctor (including antibiotics)



Warfarin (coumadin) belongs to a group of drugs known as anticoagulants. Although sometimes referred to as “blood thinners”, anticoagulants don’t actually “thin” the blood. Instead they lengthen the time it takes for a blood clot to form. This makes it harder for clots to develop in your blood vessels and keeps existing clots from becoming bigger. If you are going to be taking warfarin you need to know some important facts about this medication. Do not hesitate to ask your doctor, practice nurse or pharmacist any other questions that you may have.

Why do I need to take this medication?

You have been prescribed warfarin either to treat a blood clot or to prevent you from having a blood clot. The medical term for a blood clot is “thrombosis”. Your blood clot may have occurred in one of your veins or it may be in an artery. Vein clots are called “deep vein thrombosis” (DVT) and these can be associated with clots in lungs known as “Pulmonary Emboli ” (PE). Clots in arteries (arterial thrombosis) can cause heart attacks, strokes and peripheral vascular disease. Warfarin is commonly also used to prevent clots occurring within the heart when it beats irregularly (atrial fibrillation).

How much warfarin do I need?

When you are on warfarin your doctor will arrange for you to have a regular blood test and will adjust the warfarin dose you take, depending on the blood test result. The test is called an INR (International Normalised Ratio) and is used to determine how much warfarin you need. The amount of warfarin needed to achieve the desired INR result range is different for different people. There are different INR result ranges for different conditions and your doctor will advise the appropriate range for you depending on why you are taking warfarin.

When should the dose be changed?

For most conditions the target INR is 2.5 with the acceptable treatment range usually 2.0 – 3.5. Sometimes your doctor will

advise a different therapeutic target for particular situations. If the INR falls too low the dose will be increased. A reduction in dosage is needed if the INR increases to high levels.

How often do I need a blood test?

The INR test needs to be done frequently, often daily, when you first start taking warfarin. Once your “dose range” has been determined testing is less frequent but still needs to be performed at regular intervals for the duration of treatment. The frequency of continued testing will be advised by your doctor and depends on a number of factors such as your age, other medicines you are taking and how much your INR test result varies from test to test. Variation in the INR test is expected. If your INR changes too much or if the result falls outside the target range for your condition, the dosage will need to be adjusted. Many factors can alter the way your body responds to warfarin. Examples include dietary change, bowel upset, other illness or taking other drugs including antibiotics. Ask your doctor if any new drug you need to take will affect your warfarin control.



Do I always need to have my blood test early in the morning?

If your doctor or practice nurse is wanting to review your warfarin dosage on the same day as the blood test is taken, then it is essential to have the blood collected before 11.00am to enable Diagnostic Medlab to get the test result back to the practice by late afternoon. Often however, the test is done as part of “routine monitoring” to ensure that the current dose remains appropriate. Under these circumstances the test can be done anytime during the day, and the doctor will have the result the next day to confirm the warfarin dose that is needed.

Are there any unwanted side effects of warfarin?

The most serious potential side effect of warfarin is either internal or external bleeding. This could result in the loss of a large amount of blood, known as a haemorrhage. To deal with this possibility, you should become familiar with these warning signs:

- Excessive or unexplained bleeding from your gums or nose
- Excessive or prolonged menstrual or vaginal bleeding
- Excessive or unexplained bruising
- Red or rust coloured urine
- Black stools, or blood in stools
- Unexplained body pain or swelling
- Dizziness or faintness
- Severe or prolonged headache

Notify your doctor’s practice immediately if you develop any of these symptoms.

How can I reduce my risk of bleeding?

You do not bleed faster after injury when on warfarin but you will bleed for longer. So you will need to take some precautions to avoid injury. For example, do not take part in any activities that pose a risk of significant injury, particularly contact sports. Consider shaving with an electric razor instead of a blade. Use a soft bristled toothbrush and floss gently with waxed floss. Protect against injury by wearing gloves when you’re gardening and wearing shoes indoors and outside. Put non-slip mats in the bathtub and shower. If you do sustain an injury or fall, inform your doctor immediately. Also let your doctor know whenever you have diarrhoea or vomiting. These can make you more vulnerable to warfarin’s effects and could increase the risk of bleeding. Slight adjustments in dosage may be necessary to prevent this. Stay on a steady well balanced diet. Vitamin K affects how your body reacts to warfarin, so do not significantly increase or decrease your consumption of foods rich in this vitamin such as **broccoli, cabbage, asparagus, lettuce, spinach, kale, liver, coffee and green tea**. **Cranberry juice** should be avoided.