

# Warfarin

## What are Anticoagulants?

Anticoagulants are medicines that prevent the blood from clotting as quickly as normal. Some people call anticoagulants blood thinners. The blood is not actually made any thinner - it just takes longer to clot whilst you are taking anticoagulants

## What is Warfarin?

Warfarin is a medication that affects clotting factors that are produced in the liver. This results in your blood taking longer to clot and less likely to form harmful clots. These drugs prevent clots from forming in blood vessels or in your heart. They can also stop existing blood clots from getting any larger. After starting warfarin, it takes 3-4 days before it starts working.

## Why do I need to take Warfarin?

You have either had a blood clot or you are felt to be at increased risk of getting a blood clot. Warfarin is prescribed to help stop abnormal blood clotting and prevent clotting events. Some of the conditions it may be prescribed for are: To help prevent stroke in Atrial Fibrillation. If you have a replacement prosthetic heart valve. If you have had a deep vein thrombosis or a pulmonary embolism. If you have a genetic clotting disorder. You should discuss the benefits and risks of taking warfarin with your health care professional.

## Do I need to have regular blood tests with Warfarin?

People taking warfarin need to have a regular blood test called an international normalised ratio (INR). INR measures the time it takes your blood to clot. The higher the INR, the longer it takes your blood to clot. So this helps to prevent blood clots from forming. However, if your INR is too high, there is an increased risk of bleeding, but a low INR may not provide enough protection against clotting. Your INR reading may vary but it will need to be kept within a certain range depending on the reason why you are taking warfarin. This is called your therapeutic range and will be decided by your GP or consultant.

## What is the dose of Warfarin?

Warfarin is available in different strength tablets. Each strength is a different colour and has the number of milligrams imprinted on it. Pink is 5mg, Blue is 3mg, Brown is 1mg and White is 0.5mg. You should remember the dose you are taking and not just the colour of the tablet. Warfarin is taken once a day.

The dose of warfarin needed by different patients varies. For this reason, blood tests are needed to measure the effect of warfarin on the blood's ability to clot. This ensures that you are not getting too much or too little medication. Blood tests must be done for as long as you take warfarin because many factors can affect your response to it. A blood test result that is within your therapeutic range is the most important aspect of warfarin therapy.

## How long do I need to take Warfarin for?

How long you need to take it depends on why you need warfarin. Some people will need to take it for the rest of their lives. Others will only need to take it for between 3-12 months. You should never stop taking this medication without discussing it with your doctor first.

## What should I do if I miss a dose?

If you forget to take your dose at your usual time, take it when you remember at any time on that day. If it is the next day when you remember that you forgot to take yesterday's dose, you should contact your clinic for advice. If you forget to take your warfarin for two or more days in a row, DO NOT take all of the missed doses. Call your clinic for instructions.

## How do lifestyle and diet affect Warfarin?

Patients taking warfarin should continue their usual physical activities and are free to start new physical activities. However, you should probably avoid contact sports or other activities in which injuries are common.

It is important for people to eat a healthy diet. Some foods contain vitamin K. In high amounts, vitamin K can reverse the anticoagulant effects of warfarin. Foods that contain vitamin K include the dark green vegetables such as spinach, broccoli, brussel sprouts, asparagus, salad greens, and cabbage. These foods are among the healthiest and should NOT be avoided. However, you should try to have a reasonably similar amount of these foods every week. If you plan to make a major change in your diet, tell your clinic. Also, tell them if you are unable to eat for several days.

Alcohol can affect the INR value. It is better to have one or two drinks regularly than to have nothing and then a large amount at once. DO NOT binge drink.

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## Does Warfarin have interactions with other medications?

Many medications interact with warfarin and increase or decrease its effect. It is important to tell your clinic about all prescription and non-prescription medications as well as herbal and natural health products you take. It is also important that you check with your clinic before starting any new medication or stopping any medication. It is generally advised to have an INR test 3-5 days after starting, or stopping, a medication that might interact with warfarin.

## What are the side effects of Warfarin?

All medicines have the potential to cause side effects for some people. You should read the patient information leaflet that you will find in the box. With all anticoagulants, the major side effect can be bleeding. Tell your health care professional if you experience any of the following:

- *Bloody black or tarry stools*
- *Blood in the urine*
- *Coughing up or vomiting blood or material that looks like coffee grounds*
- *Nose bleeds*
- *Bleeding from your gums*
- *Unusual or extensive bruising*

## What if I need to have surgery or a procedure?

You should tell anyone who is treating you that you are taking warfarin. Make sure that you tell the doctor or surgeon well before the surgery. If you need to have an anesthetic for a medical procedure or surgery, you may need to stop taking warfarin for a short time. The doctor will tell you if you need to stop taking it, and when to do so, and when to start taking it again. You may be given injections of low molecular weight heparin to prevent blood clots while you are not taking warfarin. For most dental procedures it is not usually necessary to stop taking warfarin. However, your dentist will need to know what your INR level is before treating you.

## Things to remember when taking Warfarin?

### DO

- *DO take your warfarin exactly as your doctor tells you.*
- *DO get your blood tested when you are supposed to.*
- *DO keep any record that you are given of your warfarin doses and each INR result.*
- *DO tell your clinic about all other medications you are taking. Also, talk to your clinic when you change, start, or stop any medicines (prescription or over-the-counter), supplements or herbal products.*
- *DO keep your eating habit and activities somewhat similar every day. Sudden changes can affect your INR.*
- *DO eat foods that contain vitamin K such as green vegetables.*
- *DO tell your clinic when you get sick or injured, or have bleeding that is more severe than you expect.*
- *DO keep warfarin (and all other medications) out of the reach of children.*
- *DO tell your doctor if you are pregnant or are planning to get pregnant.*
- *DO tell all healthcare providers (e.g., doctors, dentists and pharmacists) that you are taking warfarin.*
- *DO refill your prescription BEFORE running out of warfarin.*
- *DO remember to take your warfarin (and other medications) when you travel.*
- *DO consider wearing a Medic Alert bracelet or carrying a wallet card that states that you are taking warfarin.*

### DO NOT

- *DO NOT take warfarin if you are pregnant or plan to get pregnant without contacting your doctor.*
- *DO NOT change the dose of warfarin on your own, unless you are self-managing with a monitor at home*
- *DO NOT stop warfarin on your own even if you feel well.*
- *DO NOT start or stop any other medicines without telling your clinic.*
- *DO NOT make big changes in your diet, lifestyle, or activities without telling your clinic.*
- *DO NOT participate in contact sports that may result in bleeding or bruising injuries.*
- *DO NOT drink too much alcohol. 1 or 2 drinks per day is generally OK unless you have been told not to drink alcohol. NEVER BINGE DRINK.*