

WARFARIN

What is warfarin?

It is an anti-coagulant or blood thinner that is used to prevent blood from clotting. It is usually given to patients who have an increased risk of forming clots. It works by reducing the formation of blood clots, which is important in the prevention of heart attacks, strokes and blockage of major veins and arteries. As warfarin prevents blood from clotting you should be aware of the risk of bleeding.

It must be used only under very close supervision.

What should you look out for when on warfarin?

- If you hurt yourself in any way watch out for signs of excessive bleeding and bruising and report any unusual bruises or heavily bleeding wounds to your doctor.
- It can also be a spontaneous problem such as a nosebleed that won't stop.
- If there is bleeding within the body it may show itself as dark coloured bowel movements or dark coloured urine, which would indicate bleeding in the bowel or in the bladder.
- If you become ill with vomiting, the vomit may appear blood streaked.
- Your periods may be heavier than normal.
- When brushing your teeth you may notice bleeding gums.

You must go to see your doctor if you experience any of these problems.

How is my warfarin monitored?

The effect of warfarin is monitored by regular blood tests that measure the PT (Prothrombin Time) or INR (International Normalised Ratio of Prothrombin Time). Based on this blood result the doctor will be able to prescribe the appropriate dose of warfarin that will help to keep your warfarin levels within the range decided for you. Different medical conditions require different INRs.

When beginning warfarin therapy these blood tests have to be taken week to week and the dose prescribed may alter depending on the results.

Once the level has stabilised the tests are normally only needed every 4-8 weeks.

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What other factors can affect the action of warfarin?

Medicines

Many drugs can interfere with the action of warfarin. Some should never be taken with warfarin and others can interfere with the action. This is why you must always check with your doctor or pharmacist before taking even 'simple' things like vitamin supplements and over the counter remedies.

Aspirin, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs such as ibuprofen, ketoprofen, naproxen and others should be avoided as these increase the risk of bleeding.

Alcohol

Alcohol will increase your INR so it should be limited to small amounts on a regular basis rather than binge drinking.

Diet

Try and eat a normal balanced diet and avoid sudden changes especially just before having blood taken.

Remember that high vitamin K foods will lower your INR readings such as liver and green leafy vegetables (broccoli, cabbage, watercress, spinach, brussel sprouts). You do not need to avoid these foods as they are good for you but you should be aware of keeping your intake consistent from day to day.

It is also recommended that you avoid cranberry juice when taking warfarin as it increases the anticoagulant effect of warfarin and could trigger bleeding.

Taking Warfarin

- You must take Warfarin exactly as directed by your doctor. If you do not understand these directions ask your pharmacist, nurse or doctor to explain them to you.
- You must always tell anyone treating you such as a doctor, dentist or pharmacist that you are taking Warfarin.
- Always carry your anti-coagulant card with you.
- It is important to take your warfarin at the *same time every day*, your blood tests will be more consistent because of this.

- Never adjust the dose yourself.
- Never take an extra dose to catch up if you miss a dose.
- If you miss a dose take it as soon as you remember up to 12 hours late. If it is more than 12 hours late you should not take it and take your next dose at your normal time.
- Check with your doctor if you are unable to eat for several days or if you have continuing stomach upset, diarrhoea or fever.
- Never stop taking warfarin without medical supervision.

Further information:

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If you would like to speak to one of our nurses in confidence,
please call the Chest, Heart and Stroke Scotland Advice Line

Monday - Friday 9.30am - 12.30 and 1.30pm - 4.00pm

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