

Warfarin

A GUIDE FOR PATIENTS

What is Warfarin?

Warfarin is an oral 'anticoagulant', a medication taken by mouth to reduce the formation of blood clots. It is prescribed for conditions such as some heartbeat irregularities, artificial heart valves, clotting in veins, heart attack or stroke. Too much warfarin may lead to serious bleeding, and too little will not prevent clotting. Warfarin must be taken exactly as prescribed and must be monitored with regular lab tests.

Before you start warfarin treatment:

Tell your doctor about all other diseases you have and all the medicines, including over the counter drugs, herbs, herbal teas, vitamins, alternative medicines and special diets you are on. Many medications such as aspirin, acetaminophen (Tylenol) and ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin), and herbs, such as ginkgo, danshen and devil's claw increase the effect of warfarin. Some sedatives, coenzyme Q, and ginseng decrease the effect of warfarin.

For women: tell your doctor if you are, or are planning to become, pregnant. Warfarin can harm the developing fetus. If you are breast-feeding, you may take warfarin without fear of harming your baby. Warfarin is not secreted in mother's milk.

During your warfarin treatment:

- **Keep a written record of your target range, INR results and dosage.**
This can help you and your doctor manage your warfarin therapy.
- **Proper use:** Warfarin should be taken once a day preferably at the same time each day. Tell your doctor if you miss a dose. Store the medication in a cool dry place (not a bathroom cabinet), away from the reach of children.
- **Regular blood tests are important:** A blood test called an 'INR' is required to determine how much warfarin you need. Because many factors can influence how your body responds to warfarin, you will need to have regular blood tests as long as you are taking it. Your doctor will determine the range of INR that is right for you and decide how frequently it should be checked. Normally, INR is checked at least once a month, but more frequent testing may be appropriate in some situations. Try to have your test performed in the morning on a weekday so your doctor can adjust your dose if necessary.
- **Keep the Vitamin K content of your diet consistent:** Sudden changes in the amount of vitamin K in your diet can affect how warfarin works. You should not avoid Vitamin K rich foods; however, make sure that the Vitamin K content of your diet remains the same. The best way to do this is by avoiding changes to your normal eating patterns. Continue to eat a balanced diet containing a variety of foods – including vitamin K rich foods such as green leafy vegetables, soybeans and canola oil. More detailed information on vitamin K content of specific foods is available at: Coumadin@ (warfarin) for Consumers website: http://www.coumadin.com/consumer/INT_VitaminK1.asp?type=print#vege.

Additional Information:

Dial-a-Dietitian – in greater Vancouver, telephone: 604 732-9191; Toll free in BC: 1 800 667-3438

- **Do not start or stop any new medications, vitamins, herbs or supplements** without telling your doctor.
- **Avoid heavy or “binge” alcohol consumption.** Moderate, consistent alcohol intake does not influence warfarin therapy.
- **Other precautions:** Avoid any activity or sport that may result in a serious fall or other injury. Use a soft toothbrush, and brush and floss gently to prevent bleeding from the gums. Be careful when using razors. Use an electric razor if possible. Consider carrying a wallet card that explains that you are taking warfarin.
- **Inform your doctor** if you develop side effects (see below), miss a dose; change your diet, medications, herbs or supplements; become ill, have a surgical or dental procedure planned, or plan to travel. If you become pregnant, contact your doctor immediately.
- **Side effects:** Bleeding is the most serious potential side effect of warfarin. On rare occasions, additional blood products or transfusion may be required.

If you experience any of the following symptoms, call your doctor right away:

- Red or dark brown urine
 - Red or black stool
 - Severe headache
 - Unusual weakness
 - Excessive menstrual bleeding
 - Prolonged bleeding from gums or nose
 - Dizziness, trouble breathing or chest pain
 - Unusual pain, swelling or bruising
 - Dark, purplish or mottled fingers or toes
 - Vomiting or coughing up blood
- **If you get sick while on warfarin:** Illness may affect your body’s response to warfarin. If you develop a viral or bacterial infection, an episode of congestive heart failure, or nausea, vomiting or diarrhea lasting more than 24 hours, notify your doctor.
 - **If you plan to travel:** Carry identification explaining the reason you are taking warfarin therapy, target range for INR, and current dosage. Carry the warfarin record sheet (ask your doctor for a copy). Make sure you have enough warfarin to last through your trip. Carry your medications with you at all times. Do not put medications in checked baggage. Try to maintain your usual diet.
 - **If you have to see other health care providers** i.e. specialists, emergency room physicians, dentists, pharmacists, etc., tell them that you are taking warfarin.
 - **If you do not have a regular doctor** and have been started on warfarin in hospital, it is critical that you immediately find a regular doctor to monitor your proper warfarin dosage. If you cannot find a regular doctor, contact the hospital doctor for assistance.

For more information: Talk to your physician or pharmacist, or consult the following websites:

<http://www.coumadin.com>

<http://www.tigc.org/patient.htm>

Additional copies of this document are available on the BC Guidelines and Protocols website:

<http://www.healthservices.gov.bc.ca/msp/protoguides/gps/index.html>