



WARFARIN Information Sheet

What is Warfarin?

Warfarin is a prescription drug that slows down normal blood clotting (coagulation). Because it hinders the formation of blood clots it is called an “anticoagulant”. Many people refer to these kinds of medicines as “blood thinners”. They do not stop blood from clotting completely but they do make it less able to clot. After you take it, the effects of warfarin on the blood will last for one and a half to two days.

What is this medicine used for?

Warfarin is prescribed for people who are at increased risk of developing blood clots. Patients at risk of developing such clots include those with a mechanical heart valve, patients with an irregular heart rhythm called atrial fibrillation, and patients with certain clotting disorders.

Warfarin is also used in patients who have a history of blood clots, including:

- Those who have had a stroke
- Those who have had a pulmonary embolism, which is a clot which has travelled to the lung
- Those who have had a deep venous thrombosis (DVT), which is blood clot in the leg.
- Those who already have a clot (like a DVT) to prevent it from getting any bigger.

How does Warfarin work?

Normal blood clotting is complex and involves substances called clotting factors. These are made by the liver and act together to form a blood clot. Vitamin K must be available for the liver to produce some of these clotting factors. Warfarin blocks vitamin K and limits the production of these clotting factors. As a result it takes longer for blood to clot.

Dose

Warfarin tablets are available in three strengths

1 milligram – brown tablet

3 milligrams- blue tablet

5 milligrams – pink tablet

The amount of warfarin you need may vary so keep a supply of all tablet sizes.

How is the effect of Warfarin monitored?

Warfarin therapy reduces the blood’s ability to clot, but does not prevent clotting completely. The effect of warfarin on the blood must be carefully monitored using a blood test called an INR. Based on the result of this test, the dose of warfarin is adjusted to achieve ideal clotting conditions.

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Duration of treatment

This depends on the reason for prescribing warfarin. As a general rule a first blood clot is treated with warfarin for six months. For an irregular heartbeat, recurrent clots and some types of heart valves, warfarin may be needed lifelong.

How is Warfarin taken?

Warfarin should be taken at the same time every day, preferably at six o'clock in the evening. Warfarin may be taken with or without food, but if it gives you an upset stomach, do take it with food.

What do I do if I miss a dose?

Take the missed dose as soon as possible.

If it is almost time for the next dose, skip the missed dose and return to your regular schedule. Do not take two doses at once or extra tablets to make up for missed dose. Make a note of the missed dose and tell the nurse at your next clinic visit.

Tell your GP:

- That you have been prescribed warfarin.
- If you are stopping or starting any other medications. Some medications affect the levels of warfarin in the blood so it is important to ask your doctor, pharmacist or clinic nurse before taking these.
- If you have any prolonged bouts of diarrhoea or vomiting. This may affect the amount of warfarin absorbed into the blood stream

Tell your dentist:

That you are taking warfarin

Tell your pharmacist

Your pharmacist can also give you advice on medications that may affect warfarin

What are the side effects of this medicine?

The major complication associated with the use of warfarin is bleeding because of too much anticoagulation. Problem bleeding can occur from any area of the body. Patients on warfarin should report any falls or accidents, as well as any bleeding or unusual bruising.

Examples of problem bleeding:

Prolonged nosebleeds	Coughing up blood or blood stained mucus
Vomiting blood	Passing black bowel motions
Unusual heavy periods	Passing blood in the urine

A very rare complication of warfarin is skin necrosis or gangrene. If this occurs, it is most likely to take place during the first several days of warfarin therapy, and often in association with large starting doses of warfarin.

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Other body systems can also be affected by warfarin. In addition to any signs of bleeding, you should look out for unusual skin rash or irritation, unusual fever, persistent nausea or stomach upset, or pain in the joints or back.

If you have any unusual bleeding, bruising or unusual symptoms whilst taking warfarin contact the warfarin clinic or your GP. If the bleeding is heavy go to your nearest Emergency Department immediately.

Avoid situations that cause bleeding

Some people may bleed more easily than usual while taking warfarin. You can take some simple action to reduce bleeding:

- Use a softer toothbrush
- Floss with waxed floss rather than unwaxed floss
- Shave with an electric razor rather than a blade.

Warfarin and pregnancy

Warfarin crosses the placenta and, because of an increased risk of birth defects, it is generally not used in pregnancy, at least during the first trimester. If you become pregnant or plan to do so while taking warfarin, tell the doctor immediately. There is alternative anticoagulant medication, which may be used in pregnancy.

Medical Conditions

Some medical conditions may change the way warfarin works, be sure to tell your GP or clinic nurse if you have other medical conditions.

Prolonged bouts of diarrhoea and vomiting may affect the amount of warfarin absorbed into the blood stream

If you experience any of the above please contact your GP or tell the nurse at the warfarin clinic.

Dietary considerations

Some foods and supplements may interfere with warfarin. Examples appear below. In general, once you have started on warfarin, do not make any major changes to your diet without consulting the doctor.

Vitamin K –Foods rich in vitamin K can cause warfarin to be less effective. Avoid large amounts of food known to be rich in vitamin K, including green leafy vegetables (asparagus, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, cauliflower, lettuce, spinach, water cress), green tea, liver, and some vegetable oils. If you eat large amounts of these foods, it may seriously reduce the effectiveness of your prescribed dose of warfarin. In a similar way, if you stop eating foods containing vitamin K, it may lead to warfarin having an excessive effect.

Vitamin E- Vitamin E may increase the anticoagulant effect of warfarin. A patient on warfarin therapy should consult the doctor before adding or changing a dose of vitamin E or any other vitamin.

Alcohol- In single, large quantities (binge drinking) alcohol can affect the body's ability to deal with warfarin and may lead to the blood becoming very thin. Take small amounts of alcohol, for example; one glass of wine or beer per day for women or two glasses of wine or a pint of beer per day for men.

Interaction with other medications

A number of drugs can interact with warfarin. This interaction may affect how warfarin works or change how the other medications work. If this happens, your dose of warfarin may need to be adjusted either up or down, depending on the other medication. A patient taking warfarin should consult with the doctor before taking any new medication including non-prescription drugs, herbal medicines, supplements, or any other products.

For example, some of the most common non-prescription pain medications eg aspirin and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory agents e.g. ibuprofen (brand name Brufen) increase the anticoagulant effects of warfarin. If you take these medicines, your dose of warfarin may need to be adjusted.

Remember you cannot donate blood while taking warfarin and for 5 days after stopping warfarin

How should I store this medicine?

Store at room temperature.

Protect tablets from moisture. Do not store in a bathroom or kitchen.

GENERAL STATEMENTS

Always check the label and expiry date before taking any medication

- Do not share your medicine with others and do not take anyone else's medicine.
- Keep all medicine out of the reach of children and pets.
- Keep a list of all your medicines (prescription, natural products, supplements, vitamins, over-the-counter) with you.
- Talk with your GP before starting any new medicine, including over-the-counter, natural products, or vitamins.

This leaflet is for general information only and is not a substitute for medical advice.