

Coumadin - Introduction for New Users

Introduction

Blood clots are frequent in patients who have diseases of the blood vessels or heart.

Blood clots may pose a dangerous threat to some people, as they may cause loss of a limb, strokes, and even death. Your doctor may ask you to take a blood thinner to help prevent harmful blood clots. Coumadin[®], also known as warfarin, is the most frequently used blood-thinning medication.

This reference summary will help you understand better the benefits and risks of Coumadin.

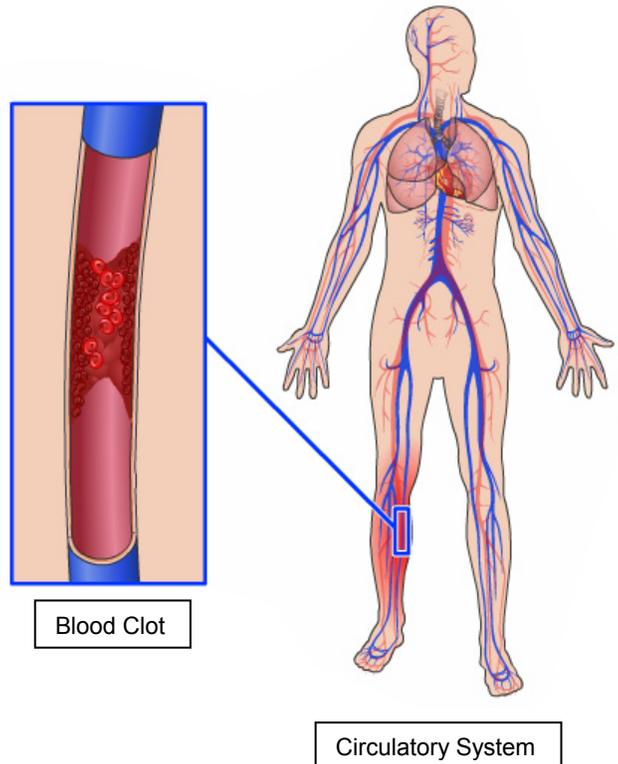


Benefits of Coumadin

Blood contains natural substances that cause it to clot. When a person bleeds as a result of an injury, the natural clotting substances in the blood cause the blood at the injury site to harden and form a seal. These “good clots” help minimize blood loss from the injury site.

Some patients with diseases of the blood vessels and heart, or who are limited in their mobility following surgery, can form harmful blood clots inside the blood vessels. These harmful clots are called thrombi.

These clots can get bigger and block the flow of blood within blood vessels. They can also move within the body. Body parts, which stop receiving blood because of a thrombus can be damaged considerably.



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A blood clot or thrombus in the arteries of the brain can stop the blood flow to a part of the brain and lead to a stroke.

The symptoms of a stroke are weakness, numbness confusion, problem speaking or understanding, vision impairment, total paralysis and even death.

A heart attack results when a thrombus stops blood flow to the heart. The symptoms of a heart attack are chest pain, shortness of breath, possible arm and jaw pain, losing consciousness and possibly death. A blood clot in the arteries that go to one of the extremities, be it an arm or a leg. This can lead to severe pain or coldness in the extremity.

An extremity may even become gangrenous due to a blood clot. Gangrene may happen when a thrombus stops blood flow to part of the leg. This may lead to the death of the affected part and the necessity of amputation. A pulmonary embolism occurs when a thrombus stops blood flow to the lungs. This may lead to shortness of breath and the possibility of death.

Although all people are at some risk of forming harmful blood clots, patients on bed rest or with cardiovascular diseases, irregular heartbeat, or implanted medical devices are at a higher risk.

To reduce the risk of harmful blood clots, doctors may ask patients to take a medicine called a blood thinner. Coumadin is the most commonly prescribed blood thinner. Coumadin is a brand name of a drug known as warfarin.

Coumadin decreases the ability of the body to form clots. This makes it less likely that harmful blood clots will form inside the heart and blood vessels or around implanted devices such as mechanical valves.

Your doctor will tell you for how long you will have to take Coumadin. Some patients may have to take Coumadin forever.



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Risks of Coumadin

Like any other medicine, Coumadin poses some risks which you should know about. By understanding how they arise you will be able to avoid them or detect them early if they happen.

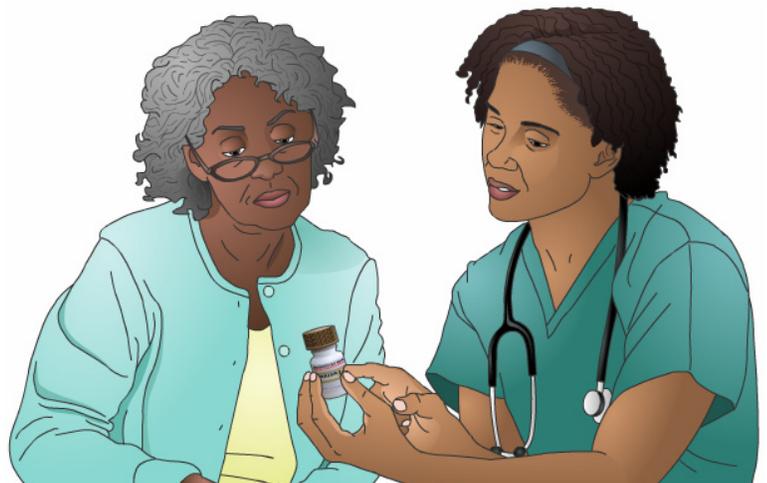
Because Coumadin reduces the ability of the body to form blood clots, a patient on Coumadin will bleed longer after an injury than a patient who is not on Coumadin.

Longer bleeding can result in excessive loss of blood if the person is involved in an accident. Severe blood loss can be fatal. Bleeding inside the brain, even after minor accidents, can also be deadly.

In addition to the risks associated with bleeding after accidental injuries, faster bleeding also poses a potential risk when bleeding occurs inside the body. For example, if there is bleeding in the stomach, caused by an ulcer, the body cannot easily stop this bleeding. This can cause dangerous situations that may be fatal.

For these reasons, your doctor will give you enough Coumadin to thin your blood without thinning it too much. If the blood is not thin enough, blood clots inside the blood vessels and heart may form. If, on the other hand, the blood is too thin, you risk a longer bleeding time. The solution is to take the amount of Coumadin requested by your doctor AND to check how thin your blood is on a regular basis.

Coumadin is not rat poison. It is similar to a chemical used in certain rat poison products, but it is different, used in smaller amounts and carefully monitored to make sure it is not toxic.



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Taking Coumadin

Coumadin pills come in different colors. Each color contains a different dosage of Coumadin. Your doctor will indicate the dosage, which is best for you and when to take it. Patients who take Coumadin on a daily basis are required to take the pill at the same time of the day.

Your doctor will start by giving you the dose of Coumadin, which is expected to be most effective for you. The amount of Coumadin your doctor gives you may be adjusted if the dosage is found to be too high or too low.

There currently exists a genetic blood test that may help physicians determine how sensitive a person is to Coumadin.

The result of such a test can help improve the dosing of Coumadin. Unfortunately, not all insurance companies pay for such a test.

If your blood is too thin, your doctor will reduce your dose of Coumadin. If your blood is not thin enough, your doctor will increase the dose.

To determine whether or not the dosage of Coumadin which your doctor has recommended is appropriate for you, the doctor or nurse will take a small amount of your blood and do a prothrombin time test, also known as a protime, PT test, or INR test.

The Protime Test

To perform a protime test, a nurse or lab technician will draw about 5cc of blood from an arm vein. In the blood lab, chemicals will be added to the blood sample to determine how thin it is.

The results of the PT/INR test are usually available to your doctor a few hours after your blood is drawn or within 2 hours if needed urgently.



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Home protime testing kits also are available for people who have to take blood thinners for long periods and who have been trained in taking blood samples and testing them.

To do a protime test at home, you will use a meter, PT/INR test strips and a lancet device, or pricking needle. Your health care provider will give you specific instructions on how to test yourself.

A PT/INR test provides two important numbers. The prothrombin time, which is called PT, and the INR. In patients who are not taking any blood thinner, the PT is about 12 seconds and the INR about 1. In patients taking blood thinners, both values are higher.

Different medical conditions necessitate different ranges of INR. Your doctor will tell you the range within which your INR should be.

If the INR number is lower than it should be, the doctor will ask you to take a higher dose of Coumadin. If the INR number is higher than it should be, the doctor will ask you to take a lower dose of Coumadin.

Controlling Your Protime

Although the prescribed amount of Coumadin should help keep your INR within acceptable limits, illness, diet, exercise, and other medications you are taking may affect how thin your blood is. This is why your doctor will ask you to have your INR number checked regularly.

Fortunately, there are several things you can do to prevent sudden changes in your INR and keep your blood as thin as it should be.

To keep your blood as thin as it should be, you should:

- Take the dosage of Coumadin prescribed by your doctor, always at the same time of the day.
- Keep your eating habits regular.
- Keep your exercise level regular.
- Have your protime checked regularly.

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Check with your pharmacist and doctor before taking **ANY** new medications, especially over-the-counter medications, antibiotics, vitamins and herbal products.

Talk with your doctor about products containing aspirin. Avoid aspirin-like products, such as Advil[®] and Aleve[®]. For over-the-counter pain relief, discuss acetaminophen as an option with your doctor.

Inform your doctors of any new or unusual symptoms. You should follow your doctor's instructions when you take Coumadin.



If you miss a dose of Coumadin, do not take an extra pill to “catch up”.

Maintaining regular daily activities, including consistent eating and exercise habits will make it less likely that your doctor will need to change your dosage of Coumadin.

Because having too much food with Vitamin K in your system may lower your protime, it is important to keep the amount of Vitamin K in your diet steady.

The following foods are high in Vitamin K:

- Beef liver, pork liver,
- Green tea,
- Broccoli,
- Chick peas,
- Kale,
- Green turnips,
- Brussels sprouts,
- Parsley,
- And spinach.



If you have any questions about any other diet item, check the Coumadin manual or call your physician or pharmacist.

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Be extra careful not to vary the amount of green, leafy vegetables you eat. Consume small amounts consistently or avoid V8® products and products that contain cranberry and grapefruit. Green tea can also cause variations in your INR if not consumed consistently.

Avoid excessive use of alcohol. If you drink, limit the amount of alcohol you drink to small, regular quantities.

The more similar your activities and exercising habits are every day, the less likely it is that your doctor will change the amount of Coumadin you take. It is important to have your protime checked regularly. Your doctor will tell you how frequently you should have this blood test performed.

Once your doctor receives your test results from the lab, he or she will tell you whether you should increase or decrease the amount of Coumadin you take and by how much.

Patients on Coumadin should ask their pharmacist and physician before starting any new medications, especially antibiotics. This includes over-the-counter medications.

Make sure to tell all your healthcare providers, including your dentist, that you are on Coumadin, especially if any type of surgery or injection is contemplated.

As a patient on Coumadin, you should always tell your doctor if you are pregnant or may become pregnant. Coumadin could cause serious malformations in a small percentage of unborn babies when taken during the first trimester of pregnancy.

It can also cause excessive bleeding during delivery. If you use knives when preparing food, be extra careful. Razors and hard toothbrushes can cause bleeding; use an electric shaver and a soft toothbrush instead.

It is recommended that patients who are on Coumadin wear a Medical Alert bracelet. This is especially important in cases of medical emergencies when you are unable to communicate with your doctors.



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When To Call Your Doctor

Even if you are taking the prescribed amount of Coumadin, dangerous internal bleeding or blood clots can still happen. It is therefore very important to report to your physician ANY signs of internal bleeding or blood clots. This section discusses when you should call your doctor.

You, or one of your family members or friends, should call your doctor if you have a serious fall or hit your head, especially if you develop a headache or if you become sleepy or weak.



The doctor may want to check that you do not have a bleeding within the brain.

If you notice any blood in your urine or stools, or if the urine or stools turn very dark, call your doctor.

The doctor may want to check that you do not have internal bleeding in your digestive or urinary systems.

If you notice unusual bruising or black and blue marks on your skin for unknown reasons, you should inform your doctor. This may mean that you are bleeding under your skin.

Check with your doctor if you experience dizziness, trouble breathing, chest pain, or if you feel weak or more tired than usual; these can be the signs of blood loss and anemia.

Call your doctor when there is bleeding that does not stop after approximately seven minutes from cuts or from your nose. Call your doctor if you notice more bleeding than usual when you brush or floss your teeth.

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Tell your doctor if you notice more bleeding than usual when you get your menstrual period or bleeding between periods.

If you have a high fever, or an illness seems to be getting worse, check with your doctor.

You should also check with your doctor if you notice any blood when you cough or vomit, or if you have loose or runny stools (diarrhea), or you have an infection with high fevers and chills.

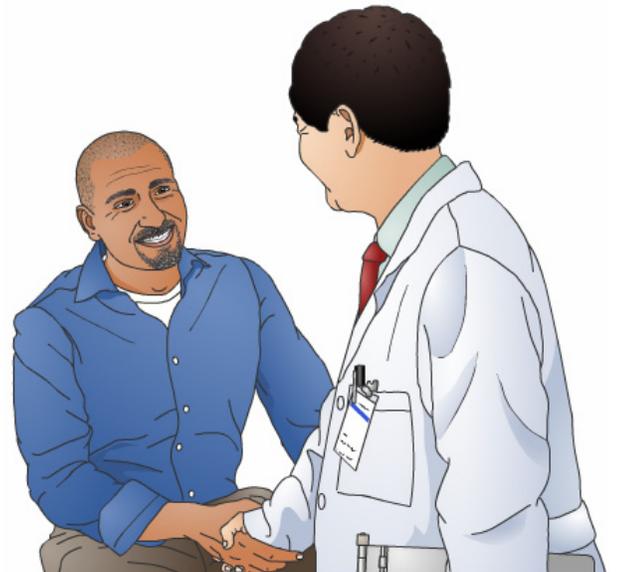
If you experience pain or swelling in any of your joints, check with your doctor, as you could be bleeding inside the joint.

Summary

Coumadin helps reduce the risk of harmful blood clots forming in the body. About two million patients in the USA use blood thinners to prevent complications from harmful clots.

Coumadin is a relatively safe medication if you take it properly, check your protime regularly, keep your eating and exercise habits steady, and communicate with your doctor when needed.

Your doctor and nurse are available to answer any questions you may have about Coumadin and its usage.



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