

Warfarin - Introduction for New Users

Introduction

Blood clots can happen in patients who have problems with their blood, blood vessels, or heart. Blood clots may be dangerous. They may lead to the loss of an arm or leg, strokes, or death. Your health care provider may ask you to take a blood thinner to help prevent harmful blood clots. Warfarin is a blood-thinning medicine.

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

Benefits of Warfarin

After an injury, natural clotting substances in the blood cause the blood to harden and seal over the injury site. These clots help minimize blood loss.

Some patients can form harmful blood clots inside the blood vessels. This may happen if the person has problems with their blood, blood vessels, or heart. It may also happen after surgery. These clots can get bigger and block the flow of blood within blood vessels. They can also move within the body. This can cause harm to affected body parts.

A blood clot in the arteries of the brain can stop blood flow and lead to a stroke. The symptoms of a stroke are:

- Weakness
- Numbness
- Confusion
- Problem speaking or understanding
- Vision impairment

It can also cause total paralysis and even death.



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A heart attack happens when a blood clot stops blood flow to the heart. The symptoms of a heart attack include:

- Chest pain.
- Shortness of breath.
- Possible arm and jaw pain.

A heart attack can also result in a loss of consciousness or death.

A blood clot in the arteries that go to an arm or a leg can lead to severe pain, coldness, or an infection called gangrene. Gangrene is an infection that happens when tissue in the body dies. Surgery may be needed to remove the infected body part. A blood clot can also stop blood flow to the legs or lungs. This may lead to leg swelling and shortness of breath or death.

All people are at some risk of forming harmful blood clots. But patients with certain medical problems and those who are on bed rest are at higher risk. To lower the risk of harmful blood clots, health care providers may ask patients to take a medicine called a blood thinner. Warfarin is a commonly prescribed blood thinner.

Warfarin 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 devices inside the body, such as mechanical heart valves.

Your health care provider will tell you for how long you will have to take warfarin. Some patients may have to take warfarin for their entire lives.

Risks of Warfarin

Like any other medicine, warfarin poses some risks. Learning about the risks can help you avoid them or detect them early if they happen. Because warfarin reduces the ability of the body to form blood clots, a patient on warfarin will bleed longer after an injury than those who are not on warfarin.



If you are involved in an accident while taking a blood thinner, you could lose too much blood. Even minor accidents, such as falls, can cause bleeding inside the body or brain. Severe bleeding can cause death if not treated, but this is very rare. Let a health care provider know right away if you notice signs of bleeding.

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For these reasons, your health care provider will give you enough warfarin 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 the blood is too thin, you are at a higher risk of bleeding.

Take the amount of warfarin your health care provider prescribes. You should also have your blood tested on a regular basis to see how thin it is.

Taking Warfarin

Warfarin pills come in different colors. Each color is a different dose of warfarin. Your health care provider will tell you the best dose and when you should take it. Patients who take warfarin every day must take the pill at the same time each day. It is often taken in the evening so doses can be adjusted the same day as blood tests if needed.



Your health care provider will start by giving you the dose of warfarin that is expected to be the most effective. The amount of warfarin your health care provider gives you may be changed if the dose is found to be too high or too low. If your blood is too thin, your health care provider will lower the dose of warfarin. If your blood is not thin enough, your health care provider will increase the dose.

Your health care provider or nurse will take a small amount of your blood to check whether the dose is correct. This is called an INR test. You may hear this test called a protime test, PT test, PT/INR test, or prothrombin test. This test tells your health care providers how thin or thick your blood is.

The PT/INR Test

To do an INR test, a nurse or lab technician will draw about 5 ml (1 teaspoon) of blood from a vein in your arm or stick your finger to get a blood sample. The results of the test are often available a few hours after your blood is drawn or within 2 hours, if it is needed right away.



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In patients who are not taking any blood thinner, the INR is about 1.0. In patients taking blood thinners, this value will be higher. The INR range will depend on the medical conditions you have. Your health care provider will tell you the best INR range for you.

If the INR number is lower than it should be, your health care provider will prescribe a higher dose of warfarin. If the INR number is higher than it should be, your health care provider will prescribe a lower dose of warfarin.

Controlling Your INR

The prescribed amount of warfarin should help keep your INR within acceptable limits. But illness, diet, exercise, and other medicines may affect how thin the blood is. Your health care provider will ask you to have your INR checked regularly.

You can do several things to prevent sudden changes in your INR. This will help you keep your blood as thin as it should be. To keep your blood as thin as it should be, you should take the correct dose of warfarin prescribed by your health care provider, always at the same time of the day.



Check with your health care provider before taking any new medicines, especially over-the-counter medicines, antibiotics, vitamins, and herbal products.

Talk with your health care provider about products that have aspirin. Avoid aspirin-like products, such as ibuprofen (Advil®) and naproxen (Aleve®). For over-the-counter pain relief, talk with your health care provider about acetaminophen. Tell your health care providers about any new or unusual symptoms you may have.

You should follow your health care provider's instructions when you take warfarin. If you miss a dose of warfarin, try to take it within 12 hours of the missed dose. Do not take an extra pill to catch up if more than 12 hours have passed since the time you normally take it.

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You should not change your regular daily activities while taking warfarin. This way your dose of warfarin is less likely to change. Make sure your eating and exercise habits stay consistent.

Eating too much food with Vitamin K may lower your INR. For this reason, you must keep the amount of Vitamin K in your diet steady. Some foods that are high in Vitamin K are:

- Beef or pork liver
- Broccoli
- Kale
- Spinach
- Brussels sprouts
- Asparagus
- Collard and turnip greens



If you have any questions about any other food, check the warfarin manual or call your health care provider. Do not change the amount of green and leafy vegetables you eat. You should eat small amounts consistently. If you choose to drink V8® products, you should drink them on a regular basis. Grapefruit and cranberry juice should be limited to 8 ounces or less a day.

Ask your health care provider if you can drink any alcohol while taking warfarin. The more similar your activities and exercising habits are each day, the less likely it is that your health care provider will change the amount of warfarin you take.

It is important to have your INR checked regularly. Your health care provider will tell you how often you should have this blood test done. Some people can check their INR at home.

After your health care provider gets your test results from the lab, he or she will tell you whether you should increase or decrease the amount of warfarin you take and by how much.

Make sure to tell all of your health care providers, even your dentist, that you are on warfarin, especially if you will have any type of surgery or injection. Taking warfarin during pregnancy raises the risk of birth defects in the fetus. It can also cause excessive bleeding during delivery.

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If you are thinking about becoming pregnant, are pregnant, or want to breastfeed, talk to your health care provider about warfarin therapy. You should be careful while using knives. Razors and hard toothbrushes can also cause bleeding. Use an electric shaver and a soft toothbrush instead.

Because people on warfarin are more likely to have internal bleeding, you should not play contact sports, such as:

- Boxing
- Football
- Hockey
- Soccer
- Wrestling

Check with your health care provider before you start a new exercise program or sport.

It is recommended that patients who are on warfarin wear a Medical Alert charm. This is very important in cases of medical emergencies when you are not able to communicate with your health care providers.



Medical Alert Bracelet

When to Call Your Health Care Provider

Certain side effects of warfarin are normal, such as feeling cold and bruising more easily.

Even if you are taking the prescribed amount of warfarin, dangerous internal bleeding or blood clots can still happen. It is important to tell your health care provider about any signs of internal bleeding or blood clots. This section will teach you about when you should call your health care provider.

You or one of your family members or friends should call your health care provider if you have a serious fall or hit your head, especially if you start to have a headache or become sleepy or weak. Your health care provider may want to check for bleeding in the brain.

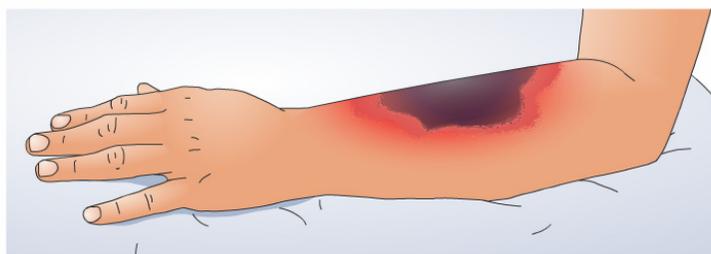
If there is any blood in your urine (pee) or stools (bowel movement), or if your urine or stools turn dark, call your health care provider. He or she may want to check for internal bleeding in your digestive or urinary systems.

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If you notice unusual bruising, large areas of bruising or black and blue marks on your skin for unknown reasons, you should tell your health care provider. This may mean that you are bleeding under the skin. Small bruises after minor accidents, such as a leg hitting the furniture, are normal, and you do not need to call to your health care provider.



Small Bruise



Large Bruise

Check with your health care provider if you experience:

- Dizziness
- Trouble breathing
- Chest pain or pressure
- More weakness or tiredness than normal

These can be the signs of blood loss and anemia.

Call your health care provider when there is bleeding that does not stop from a cut or from your nose. Call your health care provider if the bleeding does not stop after 7 minutes.

If you are a woman who menstruates, tell your health care provider if you notice more bleeding than usual when you get your menstrual period. Also call if you have bleeding between periods.

If you have a high fever or an illness that seems to be getting worse, check with your health care provider.

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

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Check with your health care provider if you have any pain or swelling in any of your joints. You could have bleeding inside the joint.

Call your health care provider right away if you experience:

- A rash
- Hives
- Itching
- Swallowing problems

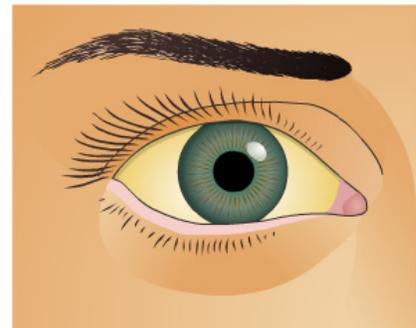
Call your health care provider right away if you experience flu-like symptoms, such as:

- Diarrhea (loose stools)
- Nausea (you feel like you need to vomit)
- Vomiting (throwing up)

Call your health care provider right away if you have:

- An infection
- Loss of appetite
- Pain in the upper right side of the stomach
- Yellowish eyes or skin

You should also call your health care provider if your hands, feet, ankles, or lower legs are swollen.



Summary

Some patients can form harmful blood clots inside the blood vessels. This may happen if the person has problems with their blood, blood vessels or heart. It may also happen after surgery.

Warfarin is a commonly prescribed blood thinner. It helps reduce harmful blood clots in the body. Like any other medicine, warfarin poses some risks. Learning about the risks of warfarin can help you avoid them or detect them early if they happen.

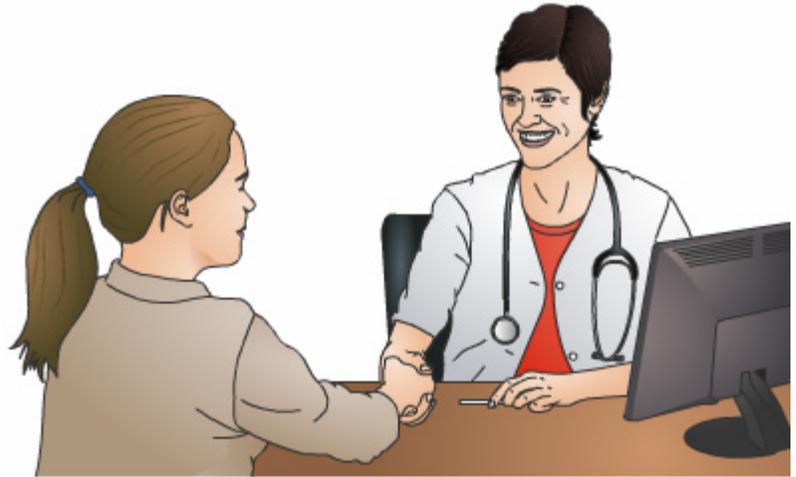
Your health care provider will start by giving you the dose of warfarin that he or she thinks will be most effective. The amount of warfarin your health care provider gives you may change if the dose is found to be too high or too low.

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Your health care provider will do an INR test. You may hear this test called a protime test, PT test, PT/INR test, or prothrombin test. This test helps them determine whether or not the dose of warfarin is right for you.

Warfarin is a relatively safe medicine if you take it the right way, have your INR checked regularly, keep your eating and exercise habits steady, and talk with your health care provider when needed.

Your health care provider may refer you to the anticoagulation clinic. Its staff are experts who have the skills needed to monitor your warfarin therapy.



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