

Fact Sheet

Living well with warfarin



This leaflet is for people who've been prescribed warfarin, or their carers, to help you live safely with warfarin. The more you know about warfarin, the more your health will benefit.

What is warfarin?

Warfarin is a very effective anti-clotting medicine (anticoagulant) used to lower the risk of harmful blood clots that can cause a stroke, or a blockage in a vein or the lungs.

Why have I been prescribed warfarin?

You may be prescribed warfarin if you have:

- ▶ an irregular heart beat (atrial fibrillation) and so are at higher risk of serious blood clots
- ▶ had a stroke
- ▶ had a blood clot in your legs (deep vein thrombosis or DVT) or lungs (pulmonary embolism or PE)
- ▶ a blood clotting problem
- ▶ a mechanical heart valve.

Why do I need regular blood tests?

You need regular blood tests to monitor how well warfarin is working. Warfarin is sometimes called a blood thinner — although this is not how it actually works. Warfarin works by increasing the time it takes for blood to clot.

The International Normalised Ratio (INR) test measures the time it takes for your blood to clot. The aim is to find a safe balance so that your blood doesn't clot too fast or too slowly. Your health professional will use your INR result to adjust your warfarin dose.

Keep a record of your INR results and daily warfarin dose.



What are the main side effects of warfarin?

The most serious side effects of warfarin, or any anti-clotting medicine, are bleeding or bleeding-related. See your doctor if you experience any unusual symptoms or if you feel unwell while taking warfarin, even if you don't think it's caused by your medicine.

Keep your INR in the target range to help avoid bleeding-related side effects.

How do I spot signs of bleeding?

Some signs of bleeding are not obvious, and some types of bleeding are more serious than others, so it's important to know what these are. Ask your health professional about:

- ▶ what signs and symptoms to look out for
- ▶ when to contact your doctor
- ▶ when to go to a hospital emergency department.

Tell your health professional about any falls, bruising and accidents — even if you don't notice any bleeding.

Talk about it

Tell all your health professionals that you are taking warfarin, including your doctor, pharmacist, dentist, surgeon, nurse and physiotherapist. It's important for them to know this before they prescribe any new medicines or if you need surgery or other treatment. Tell your family and carers too.

Take your warfarin at the same time every day

Take warfarin once a day, at the same time, exactly as directed by your health professional. You could set an alarm or a reminder on your mobile phone, or use another trigger such as the evening news on TV.

Warfarin comes in different tablet strengths; each strength is a different colour. Your doctor may prescribe more than one tablet strength to make up your dose.

Warfarin – what you need to do

Starting any new medicines, making major changes to your diet or alcohol intake and being unwell, can all affect the way warfarin works in your body. Talk to your doctor if you have experienced any of these changes.

- ▶ Ask your doctor if you aren't sure why you need to take warfarin.
- ▶ If you feel unwell while taking warfarin, even if you don't think it's related to your medicine, see your doctor or pharmacist.
- ▶ Have your INR tested as often as recommended by a health professional. Never skip tests.
- ▶ Keep a record of your daily dose. Your dose may need to change from time to time or you may need to take different doses on different days.

- ▶ Ask your doctor or pharmacist if you're unsure of the brand, dose or strength of tablet you need to take.
- ▶ If you've missed a dose and you are unsure what to do, ask your doctor or pharmacist. Keep a note of any missed doses and tell your health professional.
- ▶ Talk to your doctor or pharmacist before you start or stop taking any medicine to make sure it doesn't interact with warfarin or affect blood clotting.
- ▶ Consider wearing a medical alert bracelet to indicate that you are taking warfarin, in case of emergency.
- ▶ Pack enough warfarin for the whole time you are away when travelling.

Stick to the same brand

Stick with the same brand of warfarin you are first prescribed (Marevan or Coumadin). These medicines are not interchangeable. Make sure you always have enough of your brand of warfarin so that you don't run out.

The tablet colours also differ between brands. Check the brand and tablet strength on the medicine label or packaging to ensure you're taking the right brand and strength as prescribed by your doctor.

Know what can affect your INR

Changes to your diet, alcohol intake, illness, other medicines and travel can all affect your INR.

Don't make major changes to your diet or alcohol intake — consistency is the key. Limit your alcohol intake to no more than 2 standard drinks per day.

Eat green leafy vegetables

You can eat green leafy vegetables if you are taking warfarin. But it's important to eat the same amount of these foods each week to help keep your INR stable. This is because green leafy vegetables (e.g. spinach, broccoli, Brussels sprouts) are rich in vitamin K, which can affect your INR.

Don't avoid foods rich in vitamin K completely. Studies show that eating regular, consistent amounts of foods rich in vitamin K is better for maintaining a stable INR, than not eating them at all, or eating varying amounts.

Check before starting a new medicine

Warfarin interacts with many common medicines including vitamins, prescription, over-the-counter and complementary medicines. This means that taking one of these medicines could affect the way warfarin works.

Know what to do if you forget a dose

It's important to take your warfarin every day, at the same time. However, if you forget to take it, only take the missed dose if you remember within 4 hours of the time you usually take it.

Don't take the missed dose if you remember more than 4 hours after the time you normally take it. Take your next dose the next morning or evening at the usual time.

Don't take a double dose at any time.

Visit your doctor before travelling

Visit your doctor well before you leave for your holiday as you may need an INR test before you go. You may also need to have your INR checked while travelling. Ask your doctor if you will need to test your INR while away, and if so how to go about it. Also ask for advice about when to take your dose of warfarin if you are travelling in different time zones.

Take precautions to prevent injuries

Avoid any activities or sports that put you at risk of injuries or falls that might cause bleeding — or take precautions to limit your risk. Make adjustments around your home to reduce your risk of cuts or injury.

Find out more

Visit the NPS MedicineWise website: www.nps.org.au/warfarin

Use the NPS *Warfarin Dose Tracker* to record your INR results and daily dose. Order or download a copy at www.nps.org.au/warfarin-dose-tracker

For information about warfarin, or any medicine, call the NPS Medicines Line on 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424) Monday-Friday, 9am-5pm AEST.

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