

# WARFARIN

## A Guide for Patients

### What is warfarin?

Warfarin is an ‘anticoagulant’, a medicine taken to reduce the forming of blood clots. It is sometimes called a “blood thinner.” It is given for conditions such as some heartbeat irregularities, artificial heart valves, or blood clots in veins, lung, heart or brain. 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 of your illnesses and all the medicines you take, including non-prescription medicines, herbs, herbal teas, vitamins, alternative medicines and special diets. Many medicines 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:** Warfarin can cause harm to the baby in the first three months of pregnancy. Be sure to tell your doctor immediately if you are planning a baby or if you are pregnant. If you are breast-feeding, you may take warfarin without fear of harming your baby, as warfarin is not found in breast milk.

### During your warfarin treatment...

- **Proper use:** Warfarin needs to be taken once a day after your evening meal. 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 things can change how your body responds to warfarin, you will need to have regular INR blood tests as long as you are taking it. Your doctor will determine a target INR range for you and how often it should be checked. INR is checked at least once a month. Testing more often is needed in some situations. Try to have your test performed in the morning on a weekday so your doctor can adjust your dose on the same day if necessary. Always update all contact information with your family doctor.
- **Keep a written record of your target range, INR results and dosage.**  
This can help you and your doctor manage your warfarin therapy. A warfarin record sheet is available from your doctor or at: [www.bcguidelines.ca/gpac/pdf/warfarin\\_record.pdf](http://www.bcguidelines.ca/gpac/pdf/warfarin_record.pdf)
- **Side effects:** Bleeding is the most serious potential side effect of warfarin.

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

- Red or dark brown urine
- Red or black stool
- Severe headache
- Excessive menstrual bleeding
- Vomit or cough up blood
- Prolonged bleeding from gums or nose
- Dizziness, trouble breathing or chest pain
- Unusual pain, swelling or bruising
- Dark, purplish or mottled fingers or toes
- Unusual weakness of an arm or leg

- **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 sudden and drastic changes to your diet or usual 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 information on vitamin K and warfarin is available in the patient guide *Warfarin and Food: a Guide for Patients* available from your doctor or [www.bcguidelines.ca](http://www.bcguidelines.ca).
- **Do not start or stop any new medications, vitamins, herbs or supplements** without asking your doctor as to how it may affect your warfarin treatment.
- **Avoid heavy or “binge” alcohol drinking.** Drinking a moderate amount of alcohol regularly (e.g., 1 – 2 glasses of wine a day) does not affect your warfarin therapy. Drinking a lot sometimes and a little at other times can affect your warfarin therapy.
- **Other precautions:** To avoid bleeding, do not take part in 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 gums. Be careful when using razors. Use an electric razor if possible. Carry a wallet card or Medic Alert bracelet that explains that you are taking warfarin. Let family members or other caregivers know that you are taking warfarin.
- **Inform your doctor** if you develop side effects (see list above); miss a dose; change your diet, medications, herbs or supplements; become ill; have a surgical or dental procedure planned; plan a baby; or plan to travel. If you become pregnant, contact your doctor immediately.
- **If you get sick while on warfarin:** Illness may affect your body’s response to warfarin. If you develop a viral or bacterial infection, episodes of congestive heart failure, or nausea/vomiting/diarrhea lasting more than 24 hours, notify your doctor. Your INR will need to be checked more frequently.
- **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 or obtain a copy from: [www.bcguidelines.ca/gpac/pdf/warfarin\\_record.pdf](http://www.bcguidelines.ca/gpac/pdf/warfarin_record.pdf)). 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 are away for a long period of time, discuss with your doctor how to get your INR checked and who is going to tell you about warfarin dose changes if necessary.
- **If you have to see other health care providers** such as medical specialists, emergency room physicians, dentists, pharmacists, tell them that you are taking warfarin.
- **If you do not have a regular doctor** and have 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, go to a walk-in clinic.

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

[www.coumadin.com](http://www.coumadin.com)

[www.tigc.org/patient.htm](http://www.tigc.org/patient.htm)

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

[www.bcguidelines.ca/gpac/pdf/warfarin\\_pat.pdf](http://www.bcguidelines.ca/gpac/pdf/warfarin_pat.pdf)