# Oral Anticoagulants in Atrial Fibrillation

## What is atrial fibrillation (AF)?

Atrial fibrillation (AF) is a heart rhythm disorder. People with AF are more likely to have "blood clots." Blood clots in small blood vessels may cause strokes or other serious problems.

## What is an oral anticoagulant?

An oral anticoagulant "thins" the blood to prevent blood clots from forming.

- Depending on your chance of having a stroke, your physician may advise you to take an anticoagulant (e.g., warfarin).
- For warfarin, the dose is carefully chosen for you, so that your blood is not "too thin" and causes bleeding, or not "thin enough" to prevent blood clots.

## What do I need to know about warfarin?

Warfarin has been used for a long time in many people. **Warfarin is safe and effective when used properly**. You need to follow the instructions from your physician and pharmacist closely:

- **Regular blood tests (called "INR")**: These help ensure the dose of warfarin is most suitable for you.
- **Interactions with drugs and foods**: Check with your physician and pharmacist if there is any change in your medications, supplements, diet or health conditions.
- **Adverse effects**: Warfarin can cause bleeding. Regular blood tests help to prevent this. Report all bleeding, bruising, swelling or any unusual signs or discomfort to your physician and pharmacist.

| Options if you cannot access a laboratory for blood tests | |
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| **Pharmacy on-site testing** | Ask your local pharmacist if this service is available. |
| **Portable INR monitor** | Speak to your physician whether this option is suitable for you. You need to purchase a monitor and test strips. |
| **Mobile laboratory** | Major laboratories (e.g., LifeLabs, BC Biomedical Laboratories) offer free mobile service to qualified people in many communities. Physician's referral is required. |

## What about the newer anticoagulants?

There are newer anticoagulants available to prevent blood clots in AF. Two examples are dabigatran (Pradax®) and rivaroxaban (Xarelto®). In clinical trials, these drugs appeared to be as effective as warfarin; however, the following is important to consider:

- **Blood tests**: Unlike warfarin, INR blood tests are not required for these newer drugs. It is not possible to test whether these drugs are working for you, or if you are taking too much. Therefore, it is very important to take these drugs as prescribed. You will also need blood tests that look at the functioning of your kidneys.

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- **Safety**: Bleeding is a safety concern with warfarin and the newer anticoagulants. But physicians are more experienced in managing bleeding caused by warfarin. If you are taking these newer drugs and major bleeding occurs, it may be more difficult to manage.
- **Interactions and adverse effects**: These newer drugs interact with other drugs and cause various adverse effects including bleeding. Check with your physician and pharmacist if there is any change in your medications, supplements or health conditions.
- **Cost**: These newer drugs are much more expensive than warfarin, even after including the costs of blood tests.

## Summary points

- Warfarin is safe and effective when used appropriately.
- Warfarin has been used for a long time and physicians have more experience managing therapy with warfarin.
- The newer anticoagulants may be options for some people. However, most people can be adequately managed by warfarin. Discuss with your physician and pharmacist to learn more.