

## **Medication Information**

# **Warfarin**

**(War – far – in)**

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### **Other names for this medication:**

- Coumadin®

There are many other names for this medication.

### **What does this medication do?**

This medication prevents:

- a blood clot from forming in a blood vessel
- a blood clot that has formed from getting bigger

This type of medication is also called:

- anticoagulant
  - blood thinner
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## Why do I need this medication?

You need to take warfarin because you have had a blood clot or you are at risk of developing a blood clot.

A blood clot can be very dangerous. It can block the flow of blood to a blood vessel so blood cannot flow to certain parts of your body.

A blood clot:

- in your brain can cause a stroke.
- in your heart can cause a heart attack.
- in your lung can cause trouble breathing. This is called a pulmonary embolism.
- in your leg can cause trouble walking. This is called a deep vein thrombosis.

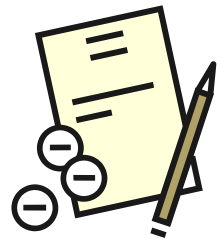
There are many reasons for taking warfarin. Your health care provider will talk to you about why you need to take this medication.

**Your health care provider may be:**

- your family doctor or nurse practitioner
- the Thrombosis Team which is made up of doctors, nurses and pharmacists. Usually a nurse calls you at home with your directions. Sometimes you may need to come to the Thrombosis Clinic.

## Who orders warfarin for me?

You need a prescription for warfarin. Your prescription will be ordered by your health care provider. Your health care provider will also tell you how much warfarin to take and when to go for blood tests.



**You will be told whom to contact if you have questions about your warfarin or need more warfarin. If you are unsure of how to contact your health care provider, please ask your nurse for this information.**

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## How do I take this medication?

- Take this medication exactly as directed by your health care provider.
- Take warfarin at the same time each day such as 6:00 p.m. in the evening.
- Take warfarin with food if it upsets your stomach.
- You may want to use a pill organizer, called a dosette. This helps you remember to take your pills.
- Keep a diary of your INR levels and the dose of warfarin you take. You can use a calendar as a diary.
- Do not stop taking warfarin without first checking with your health care provider.
- Carry medical alert identification to show that you take this medication and the medical reason why you take it.



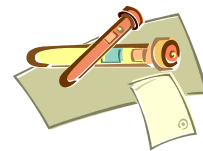
## Why do I need regular blood tests?

You will have a blood test done to measure how long it takes for your blood to clot. The result is called an INR (International Normalized Ratio) level. The INR helps your health care provider determine the right amount (dose) of warfarin for you. You should know your INR goal.

Everyone needs a different amount of warfarin to reach their INR goal.

Warfarin interacts with many medications. Any change in your medications may cause a change in your INR. When you take warfarin, you need to be followed closely by your health care provider to make sure your blood is not too thin or too thick.

You may need your blood tested more often when you first begin warfarin and when you start, change or stop other medications.



After your blood is balanced you will be able to have your blood tested less often.

**It is very important that you go for your blood tests.**

## When you go for a blood test ...

**Please have your blood test done by 10:00 a.m. in the morning.**

Your health care provider should call you to tell you how much medication to take at your regular dosing time.

If you do not get a call by an agreed time, call your health care provider for instructions.



## Whom should I tell that I take this medication?

You need to tell all the members of your health care team that you take warfarin to avoid bleeding problems. This includes doctors, dentists, dental surgeons, pharmacists, nurses, chiropractors, massage therapists, physiotherapists, kinesiologists and podiatrists, as well as anyone else you consult.

## What should I do if I miss a dose?

If you miss a dose by less than 12 hours:

- take it right away
- go back to your regular dosing time

For example, if you miss a dose at 6:00 p.m., you may take the missed dose up until the next morning. Then take your regular dose that day at your usual time.

If you miss a dose by more than 12 hours:

- contact your health care provider
  - do not take 2 doses at one time to catch up
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## What do I do when I cannot eat?

Continue to take your warfarin. Call your health care provider if you have not been able to eat food or drink fluid for 48 hours.

## Can I take other medications, vitamins or herbal products while I take this medication?

Warfarin interacts with many products. Therefore, any change may cause a change in your INR and the dose of warfarin that you need. Your blood may become too thin or too thick. **You may need your blood tested sooner than planned.**

**Talk to your health care provider before you start, change or stop any:**

- antibiotic medication
- prescription medication
- over-the-counter medication
- vitamins
- herbal or natural products

## What can I take if I have a cold or headache?

You may take plain acetaminophen such as Tylenol<sup>®</sup> for aches, pain and fever. You may take up to 1000 mg in 24 hours. More acetaminophen will affect your INR.

You may take a nose spray such as xylometazoline or Otrivin<sup>®</sup> for a stuffy nose. Limit this medication to once daily only.

Talk to your pharmacist or health care provider before taking any other medications for a cold or headache.

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## **What do I do when I am having surgery or dental procedures?**

Call the health care provider that orders your warfarin and tell him or her that you are having surgery or dental procedures. Your health care provider will arrange your care.

Never stop your warfarin unless told to do so by the health care provider that orders your warfarin.

If a referral has been made, the Thrombosis Team will manage your anticoagulant therapy leading up to your hospital stay and while you are in the hospital.

The Thrombosis Team will decide if you need to stop your warfarin. Warfarin is usually stopped 5 days before surgery to prevent bleeding during surgery. Some procedures such as minor dental or cataract surgery can be done while you are taking warfarin.

## **Bridging warfarin**

You may need to replace the warfarin with blood thinner injections. This is called bridging warfarin or bridging anticoagulant therapy. The Thrombosis Team will decide your risk of making a blood clot. The Thrombosis Team will decide if you need blood thinner injections.

You may need blood thinner injections to replace the warfarin both before and after your surgery. These injections are short acting blood thinners and are given 1 to 2 times a day for the days leading up to your surgery. After your surgery the injections will continue until your warfarin has had time to begin working again.

You may be given a bridging sheet from the Thrombosis Team that lists your bridging warfarin instructions. You must bring this sheet to the hospital with you when you are admitted for your surgery.

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## What else should I be aware of while taking this medication?

### Activities ...

- Avoid any activity that may cause bruising or bleeding such as contact sports. Avoid activity where you are at risk for head trauma such as rugby, hockey and biking.
- Avoid using a razor with a blade. Use an electric razor.

### If you have a cut ...

- Apply pressure to the cut for a full 5 minutes. If the bleeding continues, apply pressure to the cut for another 5 minutes. Repeat this process for a total of 60 minutes.
- If the bleeding will not stop after 60 minutes, go to an Emergency Department for treatment.

### If you have a nosebleed ...

- Sit down and lean slightly forward. Use your thumb and index finger to squeeze together the soft area of your nose. Keep holding your nose until the bleeding stops. Do this for at least 5 minutes. If it is still bleeding, hold your bleeding nose for another 10 minutes without letting go. Do not peek!
- Avoid touching the nostril or blowing your nose for the next 2 days.
- Keep your nostrils moist to avoid a nosebleed. You may need to gently apply a petroleum jelly such as Vaseline<sup>®</sup> inside your nostrils to keep them moist.
- Use a humidifier indoors.
- If you have a nosebleed that you cannot stop, go to the nearest Emergency Department for help.

### Brushing your teeth ...

- Brush your teeth gently with a soft toothbrush.
- Floss gently with satin or waxed dental floss daily.

### Menstrual bleeding changes ...

- Menstrual bleeding may be slightly heavier and last longer.
  - Talk to your health care provider if you are worried about any changes.
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## Common questions and answers

### Can I get pregnant while taking this medication?

- Talk to your health care provider if you may be pregnant or are planning to get pregnant.
- This medication should be stopped by the 6<sup>th</sup> week of your pregnancy.
- You may need blood thinner injections to replace warfarin for the rest of your pregnancy.

### Can I take this medication if I am breastfeeding?

- Talk to your health care provider before starting to breastfeed.
- You may be able to breastfeed a full term, healthy baby.
- You should not breastfeed a premature baby.

### Can I travel while taking this medication?

Yes, you can travel while you take this medication. It may take some planning. Here are some helpful hints for travel:



- Talk to your health care provider about your plans well in advance. You may need to take an extra supply of medication to have on hand or have your blood tested on your trip. You will need to bring a letter from your health care provider saying that you take this medication and explaining the reason for blood testing if ordered.
  - Make sure you have proper health care coverage.
  - Keep your medication in the original pharmacy container.
  - Carry your medication with you at all times. Do not store your medication in a place that might get too hot, too cold or wet.
  - Carry an up-to-date list of all your medications with the amounts you take.
  - Carry a list of the names and telephone numbers of your doctors and health care providers.
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## Can I drink alcohol while taking this medication?

It is best not to drink alcohol when you take warfarin. If you choose to drink alcohol, do not drink more than 2 standard drinks a day.

One standard drink means:

- 1.5 oz or 43 ml of liquor or spirits. This is 40% alcohol.
- 5 oz or 142 ml of wine. This is 12% alcohol.
- 12 oz or 341 ml of regular strength beer. This is 5% alcohol.

Higher alcohol beers and coolers have more alcohol than one standard drink.

## Do I need to make changes to my diet while taking this medication?

No, you do not need to change the food you eat. The most important thing to remember while taking warfarin is to keep your diet the same or consistent as much as you can.

Certain vegetables such as asparagus, broccoli, brussel sprouts, romaine lettuce and spinach contain vitamin K and can lower your INR. However, if you eat them on a consistent basis, your INR should not change. Eat at least one dark green vegetable every day as part of a healthy diet.

**Talk to your health care provider before making any changes to your diet.**

For more information about your diet while taking warfarin, ask your health care provider for a copy of the patient education handout, "Nutrition and Supplement Information - Warfarin". You can also get a copy from the website <http://www.hamiltonhealthsciences.ca/>. Click on "Patient Education".

## Reasons for taking warfarin

There are many reasons for taking warfarin. Common reasons are:

- **Atrial Fibrillation (AF)**

Atrial fibrillation is a condition of the heart. In AF, the upper parts of the heart, called the atria, beat too quickly for the normal flow of blood from the heart to the body. Blood inside the atria stops moving and a blood clot may form. A blood clot can travel through the body into the brain causing a stroke.

- **Artificial Heart Valve**

An artificial heart valve is made of metal or treated tissue. A blood clot forms easily on these materials. A blood clot blocks blood flow through the heart and causes pain and shortness of breath. A blood clot can travel through the body into the brain causing a stroke.

If you have a tissue valve you may need warfarin for up to 3 months or more. If you have a metal valve you will need warfarin for the rest of your life.

- **Heart Attack or Myocardial Infarction**

A heart attack or myocardial infarction may be caused by a blockage in an artery that supplies the heart with blood. When the heart pumps blood poorly a clot may form in the heart in some people.

- **Deep Vein Thrombosis (DVT)**

A deep vein thrombosis is a blood clot blocking a vein in a leg. A blood clot can travel through the body into the lungs. This is called a pulmonary embolism.

- **Pulmonary Embolism (PE)**

A pulmonary embolism is a blood clot in a blood vessel in a lung. This blood clot blocks blood flow in the lung. It can cause trouble breathing.

- **Pulmonary Hypertension**

A pulmonary embolism can cause high blood pressure in the lungs, called pulmonary hypertension. This can, in turn, cause new blood clots in the lungs.

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## When should I contact my health care provider?

### Contact your health care provider when you:

- start or stop taking antibiotic medication
- are having surgery or dental work
- miss a dose of this medication by more than 12 hours
- have diarrhea or vomiting that lasts more than 48 hours
- have been eating poorly for more than 2 days
- have swelling that persists without a known cause
- have joint pain that persists without a known cause
- have bloody or black stools
- have bloody urine
- have changes in any medication you take



Do not stop taking warfarin without checking with your health care provider first.

If you think you are pregnant, contact your health care provider right away.

## Go to the nearest Emergency Department if you:

- have bleeding that will not stop with usual first aid
- are vomiting blood
- have black stools (and have not been able to contact your health care provider)
- have blood in your urine (and have not been able to contact your health care provider)
- have signs of a stroke such as numbness of your face, arms or legs, slurred speech or dizziness
- have unexpected chest pain
- have shortness of breath
- have fallen and injured your head
- have unexpected leg pain with swelling
- have a severe and prolonged headache



**Tell the staff right away that you take warfarin**

Contact your health care provider if you have any questions about your medication.