Warfarin: Tips for Safe Use

What is warfarin?
Warfarin is a pill that prevents blood clots and keeps existing blood clots from getting bigger. It helps prevent heart attacks, strokes, and other problems caused by blood clots. Coumadin is a common brand name for warfarin.

It's important to know how to take warfarin safely. Warfarin can cause bleeding problems, because it slows how long it takes your blood to clot.

When you are taking warfarin, you could have problems when:

• You take other medicines. Some medicines can change the way warfarin works so you bleed too easily.
• You suddenly change how much vitamin K you eat. Vitamin K helps your blood to clot.
• You fall or are injured. An injury could cause bleeding that is hard to control.

Be careful with other medicines
Don't start or stop taking any medicines, vitamins, or natural remedies unless you first talk to your doctor. Examples include:

• Over-the-counter pain medicines, such as aspirin and ibuprofen.
• Vitamins and herbal products, such as multivitamins, ginkgo biloba, and garlic pills.
• Many other prescription medicines. Tell every health care provider you see that you take warfarin.

Safety tips
For your safety:

• Take your medicine at the same time each day. Most people take their warfarin in the evening.
• Use a daily medicine planner to write down every medicine and vitamin you take. Keep track of when and how often you take each one.
• Before any surgery or test (such as a colonoscopy), ask your doctor if you need to stop taking warfarin for a short time beforehand. Your doctor will tell you when it is safe to start taking your medicine again.
• Get regular blood tests to help your doctor make sure you are taking the right amount of warfarin. The test results tell your doctor whether your dose needs to be changed. Do not change your dose unless your doctor tells you to.
• Make a plan with your health care provider so you know what to do if you miss a dose of warfarin. If you don't have a plan and you miss a dose, call your doctor.
• Wear a medical alert tag that shows you take warfarin.
• Do not use this medicine if you are pregnant. Talk to your doctor about how you can prevent pregnancy. If you think you might be pregnant, call your doctor. If you plan on getting pregnant, talk with your doctor about what medicine you can take.
Get a steady amount of vitamin K
Vitamin K helps your blood to clot so wounds don't bleed too much. Suddenly changing the amount of vitamin K you eat each day could keep warfarin from working well. Try to keep the amount you eat about the same from day to day. Do not suddenly eat a lot more or a lot less vitamin K-rich food than you usually do. Talk with your doctor before making big changes in your diet. Vitamin K is in many foods such as:

- Kale, cabbage, spinach, turnip greens, collard greens, Swiss chard, mustard greens, and lettuce.
- Canola and soybean oils.
- Brussels sprouts, cauliflower, broccoli, and asparagus.

Prevent falls and injuries
Make these changes in your life to prevent falls:

- Wear slippers or shoes with nonskid soles.
- Use a cane or a walker if you need one.
- Put things within easy reach so that you don't have to reach over your head for them.
- Choose activities or sports that have a lower risk of injury, like swimming and walking. If you take part in activities that put you at risk of falling or injury, wear protective equipment.

Make these changes in your home to prevent falls:

- Remove raised doorway thresholds, throw rugs, and clutter.

- Rearrange furniture and electrical cords to keep them out of walking paths.
- Keep stairways, porches, and outside walkways well lit. Use night-lights in hallways and bathrooms.

When to call a doctor
Know the signs of bleeding.

Call 911 anytime you think you may need emergency care. For example, call if:

- You have a sudden, severe headache that is different from past headaches. (It may be a sign of bleeding in the brain.)

Call your doctor now or seek medical care right away if:

- You have any abnormal bleeding, such as:
  - Nosebleeds.
  - Vaginal bleeding that is different (heavier, more frequent, at a different time of the month) than what you are used to.
  - Bloody or black stools, or rectal bleeding.
  - Bloody or pink urine.