

Atrial Fibrillation: Taking Blood Thinners Safely



Anticoagulants cause your blood to clot more slowly. Often called blood thinners, these medicines include warfarin and dabigatran. They reduce your risk of forming a blood clot. They also keep an existing clot from getting larger. If you have atrial fibrillation, you have a higher risk of a stroke caused by a blood clot. Taking anticoagulants can lower your risk of stroke. If your risk of stroke is low, your doctor may suggest you take another type of medicine, such as aspirin, to help prevent stroke.

Who should take anticoagulant medicine?

You may need anticoagulant medicine if you have atrial fibrillation, even after your heart rhythm has been controlled. This is even more likely if you are at risk for a stroke. You may be at increased risk for having a stroke if:

- You have had a previous stroke, transient ischemic attack (TIA), or other blood clot problems.
- You have high blood pressure.
- You have heart failure, heart disease, or other heart problems.

- You are 65 or older. The older you are, the higher your risk.
- You have diabetes.

Doctors also recommend using anticoagulants before and after cardioversion (treatment for an abnormal heartbeat).

Taking anticoagulants safely

These medicines increase your risk of bleeding problems. Taking some simple steps can help you avoid these risks.

How can you take anticoagulants safely?

- Take your medicines exactly as prescribed. Call your doctor if you think you are having a problem with your medicine.
- Take your medicine at the same time each day. Use a planner to keep track of your medicines.
- Check with your doctor before you take any other medicines. These include vitamins, herbal remedies, or over-the-counter medicines. Unless your doctor tells you otherwise, avoid medicines that contain ibuprofen. Do not take aspirin unless your doctor says it is okay.
- Tell your dentist, pharmacist, and all other health professionals that you take blood thinners. Wear a medical alert ID bracelet.
- If you take warfarin, get regular blood tests to check how thin your blood is.

What other safety measures can you take?

- Avoid contact sports and other activities that could lead to injury. To make your home safe, take measures to reduce your risk of falling. Always wear a seat belt when you are in a car.

- If you take warfarin, do not suddenly change your intake of foods rich in vitamin K. These foods include broccoli, cabbage, asparagus, lettuce, spinach, and vegetable oils. Too much vitamin K can make your blood more likely to clot.
- Do not smoke or chew tobacco. Tobacco can affect how your body uses medicine and makes your blood clot more easily.
- Limit alcohol to 1 drink a day, if your doctor approves. Alcohol may interfere with anticoagulant medicine. It also raises your risk of falls, which can cause bruising and bleeding.
- Use items that lower the risk of bleeding. Examples include an electric razor, a soft toothbrush and waxed floss, and nonslip mats in the tub and shower. Wear protective clothing such as gloves and shoes.
- Women should not take warfarin during pregnancy because it can cause birth defects. Check with your doctor right away if you are taking this medicine and think you may be pregnant. Other anticoagulant medicines are available for pregnant women.

What should you do if you miss a dose?

Call your doctor if you are not sure what to do if you missed a dose of anticoagulant. Your doctor can tell you exactly what to do so you don't take too much or too little anticoagulant. Then you will be as safe as possible. But here are some general rules for what to do if you miss a dose.

- If you remember it in the same day, take the missed dose. Then go back to your regular schedule.

- If it is the next day, or almost time to take the next dose, do **not** take the missed dose. Do not double the dose to make up for the missed one. At your next regularly scheduled time, take your normal anticoagulant dose.
- If you miss your dose for 2 or more days, call your doctor.

Do not double the dose in any one day to make up for a missed dose.

When should you call your doctor?

Call 911 if:

- You cough up blood.
- You vomit blood or what looks like coffee grounds.
- You pass maroon or very bloody stools.
- You have a sudden, severe headache that is different from past headaches. (It may be a sign of bleeding in the brain.)
- You have signs of an allergic reaction, such as hives or trouble breathing.

Call your doctor right away if:

- You have new bruises or blood spots under your skin.
- You have a nosebleed that doesn't stop quickly.
- Your gums bleed when you brush your teeth.
- You have blood in your urine.
- Your stools are black and look like tar or have streaks of blood.
- You have heavy period bleeding or vaginal bleeding when you are not having your period.

If you are injured, apply pressure to stop the bleeding. Realize that it will take longer than you are used to for the bleeding to stop. If you can't get the bleeding to stop, call your doctor.