

Living with Warfarin

Information for patients



Disclaimer

The information contained in this brochure has been produced as a guide only. it is not intended to be comprehensive and does not take the place of your doctor's or professional medical advice.

Foreword

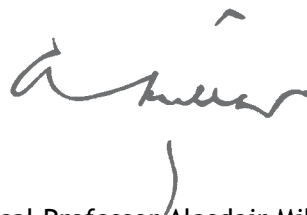
The WA Medication Safety Group (WAMSG), a subcommittee of the WA Therapeutics Advisory Group (WATAG), is a group of nurses, doctors, pharmacists, consumers and health professionals committed to improving medication safety. We believe that you, the patient, are the most important person to help improve safety and prevent mistakes. You can do this by understanding your medications well. For all your medications you should know what they are called, how much to take, when to take them and what they are for. Working with your own doctor and pharmacist will also help you get the best result from your treatment.

Warfarin is a common medication used to prevent blood clots. It is effective, but taking it is complicated because the dose can often change and regular blood tests are needed. You need to work closely with your doctor. WAMSG has written this book to help you take warfarin correctly and minimise unwanted side effects.

This book contains good information that is easy to read and understand. It has all the important information you need to take warfarin safely. Please read the booklet carefully before you leave the hospital. When you finish, talk with your doctor, pharmacist or nurse. Doing this will give you the best start to begin sharing responsibility for taking warfarin correctly and to work in partnership with your doctor.



Professor David Bruce
Chairman, WA Medication Safety Group
March 2007



Clinical Professor Alasdair Millar
Chairman, WA Therapeutics Advisory Group

Acknowledgments

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About this book

Warfarin is a useful medicine that helps many patients. It can be dangerous when not used correctly or without proper medical attention. This book will help you take your warfarin correctly and safely. It answers common questions patients ask about warfarin. By understanding warfarin you can better help your doctor with your treatment.

It is important to know:

- why you take warfarin
- how to take warfarin
- what dose you need
- when you need to see the doctor
- how warfarin can affect your lifestyle.

After you have read the book, you should talk with the pharmacist or warfarin educator at the hospital. You can ask the nurse to make an appointment for you. Please ask the hospital staff to explain any areas you are unsure of before you leave. Once you have left the hospital, your GP or local pharmacist can help answer your questions about warfarin.

**This book is yours to keep. Feel free to make notes on the pages.
You should keep this book for future reference.**

Table of Contents

Foreword	i
Acknowledgments	ii
About this book	iii
Warfarin - the basics	2
What is special about warfarin?	3
What is warfarin	3
Blood tests	4
Bleeding	5
Getting started	5
Taking warfarin safely at home	7
How should i take warfarin?	7
Missed doses	8
Monitoring your warfarin treatment	9
Other medicines	9
Diet	11
Illness	12
Warfarin and bleeding	13
Signals and symptoms to watch out for	13
Medical and dental procedures	14
Avoiding injuries	14
For emergencies	15
Medic alert	15
Pregnancy and breastfeeding	16
Stopping warfarin	16
Important points about all your medicines	16
Checklist	17
Patient details	18
Warfarin treatment card	19
Useful contacts	21

Warfarin - the basics

What is warfarin?

Warfarin lowers the risk of blood clots forming in your body.

Blood tests are needed to monitor the effect of warfarin.

Bleeding is the most common side effect of warfarin.

Taking warfarin safely

There are two brands of warfarin. These are not the same, so don't change brands.

Take your warfarin exactly as prescribed by your doctor.

Take warfarin once each day, the evening is recommended.

Make sure you always have enough tablets.

You should not skip a dose or take a double dose.

For emergencies: Carry identification that states you take warfarin.

Pregnancy: if you plan to become pregnant or think you are pregnant, talk to your doctor.

Blood tests

You need to have regular blood tests.

The dose of warfarin is changed based on blood test results.

After each test, the doctor will tell you what dose to take each day and when to have your next blood test.

Things that affect warfarin

Other medicine: Warfarin is affected by many other medicines. This includes prescription and non-prescription medicines, vitamins and herbal supplements. You need to talk to your doctor before you stop any medicines or take anything new.

Diet: Some foods interact with warfarin and affect your treatment and dose. Maintain a regular balanced diet. Contact your doctor if you can't eat your usual diet. Small amounts (1-2 standard drinks) of alcohol are OK.

Illness: Illness may change the effect of warfarin. Contact your doctor if you become ill.

Warfarin and bleeding

Contact your doctor right away if you have any signs of unusual bleeding.

Tell your doctor or dentist about warfarin before any medical or dental procedures.

Contact your doctor before starting any activity that may cause injury.

What is special about warfarin?

Warfarin has been used since the 1950s and is taken by thousands of Australians every day. However, there are a few things about warfarin that make it different from most other drugs. They are:

- the need for regular blood tests to monitor the effect of warfarin
- the need for frequent dose changes
- an increased risk of bleeding.

What is warfarin?

Warfarin lowers the risk of blood clots forming in your body.

There are two brands of warfarin. These are not the same, so don't change brands.

What does warfarin do?

Warfarin is an anticoagulant. You might have heard it called a blood thinner. Warfarin does not actually thin the blood. It lowers the risk of blood clots forming by increasing the time it takes for blood to clot.




Blood clots can cause stroke, heart attack, or other serious conditions such as blood clots in the legs or lungs.

The tablets




There are two brands of warfarin available. The brands are called Marevan[®], and Coumadin[®]. They come in different tablet strengths and colours.

Marevan[®] and Coumadin[®] brands are not the same. Always use the same brand unless your doctor specifically tells you to change. Check your tablets when you collect your prescription to make sure you have the right brand and strength, especially when travelling outside WA.

MAREVAN brand warfarin tablets

-  1 mg tablet (brown)
-  3 mg tablet (blue)
-  5 mg tablet (pink)

COUMADIN brand warfarin tablets

-  1 mg tablet (light tan)
-  2 mg tablet (lavender)
-  5 mg tablet (green)

Why take warfarin?

Warfarin is used to treat or prevent blood clots forming in the body. Common conditions treated with warfarin include:

- Pulmonary Embolism (PE)
 - blood clots in the lungs
- Deep Vein Thrombosis (DVT)
 - blood clots in veins in the legs
- Atrial Fibrillation (AF)
 - a rapid heart beat increasing the risk of blood clots and stroke
- Artificial heart valves
 - mechanical valves increasing the risk of blood clots and stroke

Warfarin may also be used to reduce the risk of blood clot related complications after some types of heart attacks or surgery.

If your condition is not on this list or you are not sure, ask your doctor why you need to take warfarin.

The length of time warfarin therapy is needed depends on the condition being treated and your individual risk factors. Your doctor will discuss this with you.

Blood tests

Blood tests are needed to monitor the effect of warfarin.

Why do I need blood tests?

To slow down the clotting process safely and effectively, a check must be kept on the time it takes your blood to clot.

The measure of how long your blood takes to clot is called the INR (International Normalised Ratio). In a person not taking an anticoagulant the INR is about 1. The higher the INR, the longer it takes the blood to clot.

The INR needed depends on the condition being treated. The doctor will try to keep the INR within a range. This is called the target INR range. The target INR range for most patients is 2 to 3. An INR in the right range will prevent blood clots and reduce the risk of bleeding. if the INR is too high, there is an increased risk of bleeding. if the INR is too low, there is an increased risk of blood clots forming.

How often do I need blood tests?

Initially, you will need a blood test daily or every second day until the right dose is found. It takes about a week to find the right dose for most people. Once this happens a blood test is only needed every few weeks. The frequency of tests is different for everybody.

After each blood test your dose of warfarin may be changed to keep the INR within the target range for your condition.

Bleeding

Bleeding is the most common side effect of warfarin.

The most common side effect of warfarin is bleeding. The chance of bleeding increases with increasing INR. Keeping your INR within your target range will reduce your risk of bleeding.

Getting started

The dose of warfarin is changed based on your blood test results.

What dose of warfarin do I need?

The dose of warfarin needed is different for every patient. Your doctor will start with one dose and then make changes based on the blood test result (INR). The dose is usually changed often in the first few days.

When does warfarin start working?

Warfarin takes four to five days to reach the target INR. Until then, injections of another anticoagulant that works immediately may be given. These injections will stop when the target INR is reached. if you go home before the target INR is reached you may need injections at home. if this happens make sure you know

- what time to give the injection
- how to give the injection
- or
- know who is going to help you give the injections - the hospital may be able to arrange for a nurse to come to your house
- make sure you have enough doses.

Your treatment plan

Before you leave the hospital you need to know

- why you are taking warfarin
- your target INR
- the dose you need to take
- the date of your next blood test, and how to get the blood test.

This is your treatment plan. Fill out the treatment plan at the back of this book.

Taking warfarin safely at home

Safe warfarin use means reducing the risk of a blood clot forming in the body while not increasing the risk of bleeding. To do this the INR needs to be within the target range.

The doctor will try and keep your INR within the target INR range by ordering regular blood tests and making changes to the warfarin dose.

There are also a number of things you can do to keep your INR within the target range. These include:

- take your warfarin exactly as prescribed
- have blood tests exactly as ordered
- make dose changes exactly as instructed
- do not stop or start any medicines without discussing with your doctor
- do not make any major changes to your diet
- limit your alcohol consumption to 1-2 standard drinks
- see your doctor if you become ill.

How should I take warfarin?

Take your warfarin exactly as prescribed by your doctor.

Take warfarin once each day, the evening is recommended.

When should I take warfarin?

Take your warfarin exactly as prescribed. That means taking the exact dose once a day at about the same time.

Warfarin can be taken before, with or after a meal. The time you take warfarin needs to fit your own daily routine. Taking the dose with the evening meal is a good idea. If an evening dose doesn't suit you, talk to your doctor.

Warfarin dose

Always take exactly the right dose. If you accidentally take too much warfarin, contact your doctor.

Warfarin comes in different strength tablets. The doctor will give you prescriptions for more than one tablet strength. The tablets are colour coded to help identify strength. Always check the label and the tablet colour.

You need to add the different tablet strengths to make up the correct dose. If you are unsure of the dose or which strength and colour tablets to use ask your doctor or pharmacist.

Tips about using the tablets

- In most cases there will be several correct ways to make up a dose.
- Do not mix brands together.
- Ask your pharmacist if you need help.

Missed doses

You should not skip a dose or take a double dose.

Make sure you always have enough tablets.

It is very important to take your warfarin every day. To help you remember, mark off your diary or calendar after you take your dose each day. Special dose aids like Dasette boxes or Webster packs can help. Ask your pharmacist about dose aids.

Do not skip doses. Make sure you always have a supply of warfarin. Plan ahead.

- If you run out and can't reach your doctor, go to your regular pharmacy.
- If you run out while travelling, visit the nearest doctor or hospital.

If you do miss a dose you need to know what to do.

What if I only just missed my warfarin?

If it is only a few hours since you missed your warfarin dose then you should take your usual dose at once. If you take your warfarin with your evening meal and miss a dose, the missed dose can be taken anytime before bedtime.

What if I missed my warfarin yesterday?

If it is more than a few hours since the missed dose (for example the next day), then don't take the missed dose. Instead take the next dose at the usual time. Do not change the dose. **Doubling up the dose is dangerous.**

Make a note that you have missed that dose and tell your doctor at the time of your next blood test.

What if I miss more than one dose?

If you missed your warfarin for more than one day, talk to your doctor for more advice.

Monitoring your warfarin treatment

You need to have regular blood tests.

After each test, the doctor will tell you what dose to take each day and when to have your next test.

You must have regular blood tests to check the INR. If the INR is not within your target range the doctor may change your warfarin dose.

Have the INR test done when your doctor orders it. Have your blood test in the morning. The result will be available the same day. Speak to your doctor before you take your next dose. The doctor will tell you what warfarin dose to take and the date of your next test.

You should have a blood test at least once a month, but sometimes you will need to have them more often.

Write down the dose and test results for your records. Most patients keep a record on a card or in a special booklet. A Warfarin Treatment Card is provided with this book.

Other medicines

Warfarin is affected by many other medicines. This includes prescription and non-prescription medicines, vitamins and herbal supplements.

You need to talk to your doctor before you stop any medicines or take anything new.

How do other medicines affect warfarin?

Warfarin is affected by many other medicines. They can change your INR and therefore affect the dose of warfarin needed.

ALL types of medicines can affect (interact) with warfarin:

- prescription medicines
- pharmacy medicines (Over-The-Counter, OTC)
- vitamins, minerals, herbal medications, dietary supplements.

Effects of other medicines are not always the same and are hard to predict. Some medicines should be avoided. For others you may need extra blood tests when starting a new medicine or stopping an old medicine.

What should I do with my other medicines?

To minimise the risk of having problems with warfarin:

- let your doctor or pharmacist know if your regular medicines change
- check with your doctor or pharmacist before starting any new medicines
- tell the pharmacist that you take warfarin before buying over-the-counter (OTC) medicines
- get professional advice before taking vitamins, minerals, herbal or natural therapies
- if you visit a different doctor make sure you tell them about warfarin.

Some common medicines that interact with warfarin

Medicine type	Examples
Prescription	antibiotics anti inflammatories heart medicines ulcer and reflux medicines
Over-the-counter	pain relievers aspirin ibuprofen cough and cold remedies
Vitamins	vitamin C vitamin E vitamin K
Herbal/Natural	ginseng garlic ginger ginkgo St John's Wort

There are many more medicines that can affect warfarin that are not listed here. Ask your pharmacist for more information.

What about Aspirin?

Aspirin also affects blood clotting and small doses (Cartia[®], Cardiprin[®], Astrix[®]) are used to stop heart attacks and strokes. If you are already taking aspirin check with your doctor whether you need to keep taking it.

Aspirin as a treatment for pains and fevers is best avoided while on warfarin. For pain or fever, paracetamol (e.g. Panadol[®], Panamax[®], etc) is safer than aspirin as long as it is used at the recommended dose. Check with your doctor if you need treatment for long term pain.

Diet

Some foods interact with warfarin and affect your treatment and dose.

Maintain a regular balanced diet.

Small amounts (1-2 standard drinks per day) of alcohol are OK.

Does food affect warfarin?

Some foods affect warfarin. Foods that are high in vitamin K are the most important. This is because the body uses vitamin K to help clotting. Vitamin K is not the same as Potassium (which is called K or K⁺ in foods and vitamins).

What foods are high in vitamin K?

Foods high in vitamin K include liver, broccoli, cabbage, brussel sprouts and green leafy vegetables (e.g. spinach).

Do I need to avoid vitamin K?

Vitamin K is needed for a healthy diet. You do not need to avoid foods with vitamin K altogether. Instead:

- have a healthy, balanced diet with lots of different types of food
- eat consistent amounts of leafy green vegetables and other foods high in vitamin K
- do not make changes in your diet without talking to your doctor.

What happens if I change my diet?

Extra blood tests may be needed for any big changes to your diet. Contact your doctor if you can't eat your regular diet.

Alcohol

Large amounts of alcohol can affect warfarin. Avoid heavy or binge drinking while on warfarin. Small amounts (1-2 standard drinks per day) of alcohol are OK.

ONE standard drink is equal to:

- ONE small glass of wine
- ONE nip of spirits
- ONE middy of normal strength beer.

Illness

Illness may change the effect of warfarin

Contact your doctor if you experience:

- vomiting or diarrhoea
- fever or infection
- loss of appetite
- jaundice
- any other illness.

Warfarin and bleeding

Bleeding is the most common side effect of warfarin. Keeping the INR within the target range reduces the risk of bleeding. Other things you need to do to reduce the risk of harm due to bleeding include:

- know what to do if bleeding does happen
- tell your doctor or dentist well before any planned procedure or surgery
- avoid activities and sport that might cause serious injuries.

Signs and symptoms to watch out for

Contact your doctor right away if you have any signs or symptoms of unusual bleeding.

Signs and symptoms of unusual bleeding:

- Bleeding that is heavier than usual or takes a long time to stop. This includes nose bleeds, bleeding from your gums, bleeding from cuts and scrapes and heavier than usual menstrual periods.
- severe bruising, not due to injury that gets worse
- red or dark urine
- red or black bowel motions
- coughing blood
- dark or blood stained vomiting
- severe headache or dizziness
- pain, swelling or discomfort.

What should I do?

You should call your doctor right away if you have any signs or symptoms of unusual bleeding. Depending on the symptoms your doctor will do one or more of the following:

- order a blood test
- reduce the dose of warfarin
- stop your warfarin for a few days
- give an antidote injection.

Medical and dental procedures

Tell your doctor or dentist about warfarin before any medical or dental procedures.

Bleeding from medical or dental procedures may be increased with warfarin. For some procedures you will need to stop your warfarin.

You should tell your doctor or dentist that you take warfarin well before any planned procedure (including operations in hospital, minor procedures at the doctor's surgery and some dental work) so that your warfarin therapy is considered during the planning of your operation/procedure.

Avoiding injuries

Contact your doctor for advice before starting any activity that may cause injury.

When taking warfarin you can perform all your normal daily activities but you are at risk of bleeding if you are injured. It is best to avoid dangerous activities that might cause major injuries.

Some things to avoid include contact sports (football, rugby, boxing, etc) or any pastime that causes knocks, bumps or bruises (cricket, etc). If you are unsure which sports and activities are safe for you ask your doctor.

Report to your doctor any:

- falls
- blows to the head or body
- car accidents
- other major injuries.

Remember, that you might not always see any visible signs of bleeding from an internal injury.

You may also consider using an electric razor instead of a blade.

Clean and treat minor cuts and scrapes immediately. Report any bleeding that is hard to stop or if any pain or swelling develops to your doctor.

For emergencies

Carry identification with you that states you take warfarin.

If you have an accident or become very ill, ambulance and hospital staff need to know that you take warfarin. Patients on warfarin should carry identification that mentions warfarin. This might be a Warfarin Treatment Card or Medic Alert. It is also a good idea to carry an up-to-date-list of all your medicines.

Medic alert

The Medic Alert program gives medical staff vital patient information during emergencies. Patients on warfarin should join Medic Alert.

You can join by completing an application form giving your personal details, medical conditions and warfarin therapy. Your local doctor can help you do this and act as your emergency contact. There is a membership fee to pay.

Medic Alert gives you a personalised, engraved bracelet (or pendant) to wear and a wallet card. Your details are available to a 24-hour response centre. Official medical and emergency workers can then access this vital information. For warfarin patients this information could save your life in an emergency.

For more information ask hospital staff for a Medic Alert application, or contact Medic Alert yourself.

Phone: 1800 882 222 Website: www.medicalert.com.au

Pregnancy and breastfeeding

If you plan to become pregnant or think you are pregnant, talk to your doctor.

Warfarin is NOT safe to take during pregnancy. It may harm your unborn baby.

- If you are able to become pregnant talk to your doctor about birth control options before starting warfarin.
- If you plan to become pregnant talk to your doctor who will discuss the treatment options.
- If you think you are pregnant, contact your doctor.

It is safe to breastfeed while taking warfarin because warfarin is not found in the breast milk of mothers taking warfarin, however make sure that the baby's doctor knows that you take warfarin.

Stopping warfarin

Your doctor will tell you how long you need to take warfarin, and when you can stop. Make sure you know who is going to tell you when to stop and when to see them. This can be your specialist or GP. After stopping warfarin your blood will return to normal in a few days.

Don't stop taking warfarin unless told by your doctor. Stopping warfarin before it is safe means blood clots might form.

If you can't take your warfarin for any reason (such as illness) tell your doctor. Extra blood tests may be needed.

Important points about all your medicines

- Don't stop taking your medicines or change the dose unless told to by your doctor.
- Your medicines are yours alone. Don't share your medicines with anyone else.
- Store ALL medicines out of reach of children. Keep them securely in one place, away from light, heat and moisture.
- Keep medicines in their original packets (with all the labels and instructions).
- Ask your pharmacist for help with containers and dosage aids.
- Check expiry dates often. Do not take out-of-date medicines. Take these to the pharmacist for safe disposal.
- Keep an up-to-date list of ALL your medications.

Checklist

Below is all the important information you need to know about warfarin. Tick the items you already know and ask hospital staff to go over the items you are unsure of.

- Why you are taking warfarin.
- How long you need to take warfarin.
- Which brand of warfarin you are taking.
- Your target INR blood test result.
- The date of your next blood test.
- How to get your blood tests.
- The time of day to take warfarin.
- The dose to take until the next blood test.
- How to use the tablets to make the correct dose.
- The tablet strengths and colours.
- Signs of bleeding to watch for.
- What to do if you notice bleeding.
- When else to contact your doctor.
- What to do if you miss a dose.
- Which medications to avoid.
- Who else needs to know you are taking warfarin.
- How to get a Medic Alert bracelet.

Patient details

Personal Details

Name: _____

Address: _____

Telephone: (H) _____ (M) _____

General Practitioner

Name: _____ Telephone: _____

Address: _____

Pharmacy

Name: _____ Telephone: _____

Address: _____

Emergency contact

Name: _____

Telephone: (H) _____ (M) _____

Warfarin Therapy Plan

I take Warfarin to treat _____

My target INR is _____ to _____

**Please complete the personal details section of this page.
Ask your doctor to complete the Warfarin details section.**

fold here →

fold here →

fold here →

fold here →

DATE	INR (test result)	DOSE UNTIL NEXT BLOOD TEST	DATE OF NEXT BLOOD TEST	DATE	INR (test result)	DOSE UNTIL NEXT BLOOD TEST	DATE OF NEXT BLOOD TEST

FOLD AND KEEP THIS CARD IN YOUR WALLET

FOLD AND KEEP THIS CARD IN YOUR WALLET



Warfarin treatment card

Name

Address

Tel no

Warfarin commenced on

Indication

INR range to

Duration of treatment

Warfarin:-What is it and how do I take it?

Warfarin lowers the risk of blood clots forming in your body. There are two brands of warfarin. These are not the same, so do not change brands.

Take your warfarin exactly as prescribed. Warfarin is taken once each day, the evening is recommended.

You should not skip a dose or take a double dose.

Make sure you always have enough tablets.

Carry identification with you that states you take warfarin.

Pregnancy: if you plan to become pregnant or think you are pregnant, talk to your doctor.

Warfarin and Blood Tests

You need to have regular blood tests. Blood tests are needed to monitor the effect of warfarin. The dose of warfarin is changed based on the blood test (INR) results.

After each test, the doctor will tell you, what dose to take each day and when to have your next test.

Record your INR and dose and date of next test on the other side of this card.

Warfarin and Bleeding

Bleeding is the most common side effect of warfarin.

Contact your doctor right away if you have:

- Any bleeding that is hard to stop
- Severe bruising, not caused by injury and gets bigger
- Red or black bowel motions
- Dark or blood stained vomiting
- Red or dark urine
- Coughing up blood
- Severe headache or dizziness
- Pain, swelling or discomfort

Talk to your doctor before starting any activity that may cause injury.

Tell your doctor or dentist about warfarin, before any medical or dental procedures.

Things that affect warfarin

Other medications: Warfarin is affected by many medicines. This includes prescription and non-prescription medicines, vitamins and herbal supplements. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist before you start or stop any medicines.

Diet: Some foods interact with warfarin and affect your treatment and dose. Maintain a regular balanced diet. Contact your doctor if you can't eat your regular diet.

Alcohol: Small amounts (1-2 standard drinks per day) of alcohol are OK.

Illness: Illness may change the effect of warfarin. See your doctor if you become ill.

FOLD AND KEEP THIS CARD IN YOUR WALLET



Warfarin treatment card

Name

Address

Tel no

Warfarin commenced on

Indication

INR range to

Duration of treatment

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FOLD AND KEEP THIS CARD IN YOUR WALLET

Useful contacts

- St John Ambulance/Medic Alert
For more information on medic alert bracelets
Telephone: 1800 882 222
Website: www.medicalert.com.au
- Medicines information line
For free independent advice from medicines specialists
Telephone: 1300 888 763
Website: www.nps.org.au
- Adverse Medicines Events line
To report unwanted side effects
Telephone: 1300 134 237
Website: www.mater.org.au/ame/
- Poisons information line
Immediate specialist advice for overdoses or poisoning
Telephone: 131 126
- HealthDirect
For free immediate health advice from experienced nurses
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