

# STARTING ON WARFARIN

## What is warfarin?

Warfarin is a prescription medicine that helps stop the blood from clotting.

There are two brands of warfarin in New Zealand – Marevan® and Coumadin®. Both brands come in three different strengths.

Marevan® and Coumadin® are slightly different from each other so they are not inter-changeable. Therefore it is important that you always stick to the same brand.

## Check with your pharmacist if:

- your tablets are different from usual (eg, a different colour, strength or brand)
- you are unsure about **when** to take your warfarin or **what** dose to take.

## Why do you need warfarin?

You need warfarin because you either have, or may get, a blood clot. Clots can be harmful if they block the blood flow in an artery or vein.

A deep vein clot (often in the leg) is called a deep vein thrombosis or DVT. A clot in the lung is known as a pulmonary embolism or PE.

If your heart beats irregularly (atrial fibrillation or AF), the blood flow can be slowed and a clot can develop causing a stroke. Blood clots in the heart can cause a heart attack.

It is important that you tell your doctor if you have any heart, liver, stomach or bleeding problems before you start treatment with warfarin.

## What makes clots more likely to happen?

- surgery
- sitting or lying in one position for a long time (eg, long flights or car journeys)
- major injuries or paralysis
- hormone replacement therapy (HRT)
- oral contraceptives (the Pill)
- smoking
- some inherited conditions
- cancer and its treatments
- pregnancy
- being overweight.

## When should I take my tablets?

Take your tablets as one dose, once a day, at the same time every day.

Taking your tablets in the evening is best. This means when your blood test is due you can get the test done in the morning. (The test is usually done about 12 hours after taking a tablet.)

Some people find it hard to remember whether they have taken their tablet for the day. To help you keep track, mark each day on the calendar as you take your dose, or use a medication organiser.

## Warfarin can be taken with or without food.

## What if I forget a dose?

Take the missed dose as soon as you remember if it is on the same day. However if you do not remember until the following day, only take the dose you would take on that day, as you should never take more than one dose a day.

## Tell your doctor about the missed dose

It is important to tell your doctor about a missed dose. Your doctor will need to take the missed dose into account when looking at your blood test results.

## Having blood tests

You need to have regular blood tests while you are on warfarin. The blood test measures the speed of blood clotting or INR (International Normalised Ratio). Your INR should be between 2 and 4, depending on why you take warfarin.

## Your doctor will tell you:

- what INR you should be aiming for
- what warfarin dose you need
- how often you need an INR blood test.

If you are in hospital, your blood will be tested there. When you are at home, your doctor will give you a blood testing form to take with you to the laboratory.

## On the day of your blood test...

**In the morning:** have your blood test.

**In the afternoon:** ring your doctor or nurse for the result. They will tell you what dose to take until your next blood test. They will also tell you when your next blood test will be.

**In the evening:** take the dose and mark it off on the calendar.

## How long will I need to take warfarin?

It depends on your condition. Your doctor will tell you how long you need to be on warfarin.

## Tell your doctor and pharmacist if you are taking other medicines or alternative treatments

Other medicines, 'over-the-counter' medications or alternative treatments can change the way warfarin works. For example, some antibiotics and arthritis medications can increase the risk of bleeding.

A number of over-the-counter medicines sold in pharmacies and supermarkets can also interfere with the way warfarin works. This includes some types of pain relief. It is, however, safe to use paracetamol.

Be careful about alternative treatments. Even St John's wort, ginkgo, ginseng, dong quai, cranberry juice and ginger can affect the way warfarin works.

## It is very important to let your health professional know if you are taking any other medicines or alternative therapies.

## When to seek medical advice

Call a doctor if you have:

- unusual bruising or bleeding
- fever, infection
- vomiting, diarrhoea
- unexplained pain
- loss of appetite for 2-3 days
- blood in urine or faeces (black bowel motions)
- changes to your skin (eg, a rash or itching)

## Eat a balanced diet

Enjoy a variety of healthy foods. You don't need to change your eating habits very much as large changes can interfere with warfarin treatment.

Try to avoid large changes in the amount of food you eat containing vitamin K. This vitamin can stop warfarin from working. Food containing vitamin K includes spinach, broccoli, lettuce, soya beans, cabbage, beef, liver, alfalfa, wheat bran and green tea. Before making any changes to your diet talk to your health professional.

## Take care with alcohol

Have no more than two standard drinks a day.

A standard drink is:

- 300ml (one can) ordinary strength beer, or
- 60ml (2 singles) sherry or port, or
- 100ml (half a glass) table wine, or
- 30ml (single) of spirits.

More than 2 standard drinks per day can increase the risk of bleeding.

## Pregnancy

Talk to your doctor if you take warfarin and think you might be pregnant, or if you want to have a baby.

Warfarin can cause birth defects if taken in pregnancy. Heparin, another medicine, may be used instead of warfarin.

## Breastfeeding

Warfarin is considered safe to use when breastfeeding.

## What if I have an adverse effect from my warfarin?

Always alert your GP or Specialist. If you experience an adverse effect which causes you a physical injury, you may qualify for cover for a Treatment Injury. Your Doctor will either lodge this claim for you, or arrange to have it lodged by another Registered Health Professional. If you are unsure, call ACC on 0800 735 566 to discuss whether ACC can help you.

## What else do I need to know?

- Always tell your health practitioners (eg, your doctor, pharmacist, nurse, physiotherapist and dentist) that you take warfarin.
- Always tell your doctor and pharmacist about any medicines or alternative treatments that you are taking.
- Use a soft toothbrush if your gums bleed easily.
- Avoid activities where you might get hurt easily and bleed too much, eg, contact sports.
- Do not get new tattoos or piercings.

## You can get more information from:

Your pharmacist and doctor, or the website:

[www.medsafe.govt.nz](http://www.medsafe.govt.nz)

## Checklist on discharge from hospital

- Warfarin book
- Discharge prescription
- Laboratory form for blood test
- You know what dose of warfarin to take



PHARMAC Level 14, Cigna House, 40 Mercer St, Wellington

[www.pharmac.govt.nz](http://www.pharmac.govt.nz)

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