

Atrial Fibrillation: Taking Blood Thinners Safely



Anticoagulants, often called blood thinners, are medicines that cause your blood to clot more slowly. 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 blood thinners can lower your risk of stroke.

How can you prevent problems from blood thinners?

Blood thinners increase your risk of bleeding problems. You can take steps to help prevent bleeding.

Take your medicine correctly

- Take your medicines exactly as prescribed. Do not stop taking your medicine unless your doctor tells you to.
- 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 or pharmacist before you start or stop taking any other medicines. These include prescription medicines, over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, and herbal products.
- Don't take aspirin and other pain relievers, such as ibuprofen, unless your doctor tells you to take them and tells you when and how to take them.
- Tell your doctors, dentist, pharmacist, and all other health professionals that you take a blood thinner.
- Before any surgery or medical or dental procedure, talk with your doctor about whether you need to stop taking your blood thinner for a short time beforehand.
- Follow directions on how to store your medicine. Some medicines must be stored in their original containers and not put in a pillbox.

Prevent injuries

- Enjoy activities that have a lower risk of injury, like swimming and walking. Try to avoid activities or sports that put you at risk of injury. If you take part in a higher risk activity or sport, be as safe as possible and wear protective equipment like a helmet.
- To make your home safe, take measures to reduce your risk of falling. These can include simple changes like removing rugs that you might trip on. Or it can be permanent changes like installing a handrail in the shower.
- Use items that lower the risk of a bleeding injury. 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. Always wear a seat belt when you are in a car.

Take extra steps with warfarin

- Get regular blood tests. These tests help your doctor make sure you are taking the right dose of warfarin. Don't change your dose unless your doctor tells you to.
- Keep the amount of vitamin K in your diet about the same from day to day. Vitamin K is in many foods such as green and leafy vegetables. It affects how warfarin works and how your blood clots. Talk with your doctor before making big changes in your diet.

Other safety measures

- Wear a medical alert ID bracelet.
- Limit alcohol. It may interfere with blood thinner medicine. It also raises your risk of falls, which can cause bruising and bleeding.
- If you are pregnant, breast-feeding, or trying to get pregnant, talk with your doctor about what medicine is safe for you.

What if you miss a dose?

Call your doctor if you are not sure what to do if you missed a dose of blood thinner. Your doctor can tell you exactly what to do so you don't take too much or too little of it. 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 blood thinner 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 anytime you think you may need emergency care. For example, call if:

- You have a sudden, severe headache that is different from past headaches.

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.

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.