

MANAGING THE RISK OF ORAL ANTICOAGULATION-RELATED BLEED: A PATIENT GUIDE

What are the risks of having a bleed on oral anticoagulation?

Oral anticoagulants work by preventing the formation of clots, which means that there is a lower risk of having a stroke. However, it also means that all types of oral anticoagulants can increase the risk of bleeding. This bleeding can range from the less worrisome (like a bruise) to more serious events (like bleeding in the brain or bleeding in the stomach).

Some of the newer oral anticoagulant medications, often called NOAC or DOAC, are less likely to cause bleeding in the brain than warfarin. It is good to discuss with your doctor what type of oral anticoagulant is best suited for you.

Overall, for most people with atrial fibrillation, the risk of having a stroke is higher than the risk of having a bleed while taking oral anticoagulation.

However, if you have already had a major bleed like a haemorrhagic stroke (bleeding in the brain), you may be more at risk of having other bleeds in the future. It is important for you to discuss your risk of both stroke and bleeding with your doctor when deciding if you would like to take oral anticoagulant medication.

What can I do to reduce the risk of having a bleed?



Take your medication every day



Keep your blood pressure within a normal range



Check for interactions between your oral anticoagulant and other medications

It is important to take the right dose of your oral anticoagulant because taking more than you need may put you at a higher risk of having a bleed. Make sure you take the medication as prescribed, which can be once or twice a day. Taking the medication at the same time every day is also important. Check with your doctor, pharmacist, or nurse how often you should take your oral anticoagulant.

If you are taking warfarin, the dose may change. To help you keep track, you will be given a booklet called the Yellow Book, where the correct daily dose will be written down. Keep this book safe and bring it with you to medical appointments.

Keeping your blood pressure under control can help you prevent unwanted bleeding. You can achieve this through a combination of lifestyle changes and medication. Patients with atrial fibrillation are advised to keep their blood pressure below 140/90mm Hg, but your target blood pressure might be different if you are diabetic or have other health conditions. Check with your doctor, pharmacist, or nurse for support and guidance on managing your blood pressure.

If you prescribed an oral anticoagulant, check with the doctor, nurse, or pharmacist if you can safely take it along with any other medications you may be taking. This is because not all medications go well together. In addition, if you are taking warfarin, you may also need to discuss your diet with your doctor as some foods (like leafy green vegetables or cranberries) interact with the medication. Drinking too much alcohol can also increase your risk of bleeding.

What to do in case of bleeding?

If you are experiencing minor bleeding, like a small cut, aim to control the bleeding by putting pressure on the wound. Once the bleeding stops, keep the wound clean and dry. Remember that bruising or minor bleeding (like bleeding from gums) is not uncommon for people taking oral anticoagulants.

If you are worried that you are experiencing more serious bleeding, attend your primary physician or GP practice, walk-in clinic, or emergency department. Make sure you tell the doctor or nurse treating you that you are taking an oral anticoagulant.

If you are concerned that you are experiencing major bleeding that cannot be controlled or if you have ANY of the following symptoms, call the emergency/ambulance number immediately:

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 - **Severe bleeding that does not stop after 10-15 minutes of applying pressure**
 - **Vomiting blood**
 - **Bright red blood in your stools**
 - **Severe persisting abdominal pain**
 - **An abnormally fast or slow heart rate**
 - **A head injury**
 - **Seizures**
 - **Loss of consciousness**