

Patient briefing

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Alert

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UNDERSTANDING NPSA ADVICE

The National Patient Safety Agency (NPSA) helps healthcare organisations to provide safer healthcare for everyone. This information is about the advice the NPSA has given healthcare organisations on making sure patients take anticoagulants safely.

Making it safer for patients taking anticoagulants

Anticoagulant medicine prevents harmful blood clots from forming in blood vessels.

Warfarin is the most commonly used oral anticoagulant in this country. Others that may be used include phenindione (Dindevan®) and acenocoumarol (Sinthrome®), and they are similar to warfarin in many ways, including possible unwanted side effects and how they should be monitored.

The National Patient Safety Agency (NPSA) has looked at how anticoagulants are given to patients and checked, and advised healthcare organisations on ways they can make it safer for patients taking anticoagulants. The NPSA also asked patients for their views and has considered these when advising healthcare organisations.

The key points in the advice given to healthcare organisations are below.

Information for patients

To use anticoagulants safely, patients must have their treatment explained to them by a healthcare professional at the start of the treatment, when they leave hospital and at their first anticoagulant clinic appointment. Written information should always be given and advice should be available throughout the treatment, whenever the patient needs it.

Patient booklet

When put on a course of anticoagulants, all patients should be given a booklet called *Oral Anticoagulant Therapy: Important information for patients*. This is for them to keep and it includes general information and practical advice. On the front page is an alert card, the size of a credit card, which should be carried at all times. It tells healthcare staff that the person is taking anticoagulants. This is important if they are in a medical emergency or about to receive another treatment.

Patients should keep the last six months' records of their blood test results in the booklet and take it with them whenever they visit a healthcare professional.

Monitoring patients taking anticoagulant medication

Patients must have a regular blood test called an INR test. INR stands for International Normalised Ratio. This is a standard test that measures how long the blood takes to clot and is important to make sure the medicine is working properly.

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Repeat prescriptions

It is important that checks are performed each time a patient requests and receives a supply of oral anticoagulants. This should include a review of blood test results and dose information, and checking that it is safe to supply more anticoagulants.

Medicines interacting with anticoagulants

Many medicines can interact with anticoagulants.

If, during a course of anticoagulants, a patient starts or stops another interacting medication they should have a blood test within four to seven days of starting the interacting medicine. This is to make sure that their INR remains within the desired range.

Before buying medicines without a prescription, including alternative remedies, patients should tell the pharmacist that they are taking anticoagulants. The pharmacist will then be able to advise patients which medicines are safe to take.

Warfarin doses

Some patients get a number of different strength tablets to take together to get the right dose. Patients have told the NPSA that they would like their dose made up of the smallest number of tablets possible. Ideally they want to take the same tablets every day rather than changing doses. They also want low strength tablets rather than having to break a tablet in half.

Patient and carer groups have told the NPSA that they would like courses of warfarin to:

- use the least number of tablets each day;
- use constant daily dosing and not alternate day dosing;
- not require the use of half tablets. It can be difficult to break tablets in half. Instead, when necessary, use 0.5mg tablets.

The NPSA has asked healthcare organisations to review the strength of warfarin tablets they give to individual patients. Not all patients will need all strengths of tablets.

Describing the dose

Patients have told the NPSA that they prefer doses of oral anticoagulants to be described in mg rather than as a number of tablets.

Dental treatment

The NPSA has advised dentists that, in most cases, patients taking anticoagulants can have dental treatment. However, the dentist will need to see a recent INR test result to ensure that it is safe to provide treatment.

About the NPSA

The NPSA promotes safer healthcare by collecting and analysing information about patient safety from staff and patients, and through working with NHS organisations to promote an open and fair culture.

If you would like more information about the NPSA's work, visit our website at:

www.npsa.nhs.uk