

# How to take direct oral anticoagulants (DOACs) for atrial fibrillation (AF) and venous thromboembolism (VTE)

**This leaflet answers your questions about anticoagulants (blood thinning medicines) that may be prescribed for you when you are diagnosed with AF (irregular heart rhythm) or venous thromboembolism (a blood clot).**

**Always read the leaflet that comes with your medicine and speak to your doctor or pharmacist if you have any questions or concerns.**

## **Why do you need an anticoagulant?**

Anticoagulants stop the blood from clotting as quickly as it usually does.

If you have AF you are at a bigger risk of having blood clots in the brain, causing stroke. Your doctor has prescribed you an anticoagulant to reduce this risk.

If you have been diagnosed with a blood clot in a blood vessel in your lungs (pulmonary embolism, PE) or in the deep vein in your leg (deep vein thrombosis, DVT), you will need an anticoagulant to stop the clot getting larger, or new clots forming.

## **Why have you been prescribed a DOAC?**

DOACs, such as apixaban, edoxaban, rivaroxaban and dabigatran, are suitable alternatives to warfarin for the treatment of AF and DVT or PE. Unlike warfarin, they are used at a fixed dose, and they do not need close monitoring of blood levels.

## **How long will you need to take the DOAC for?**

This will depend on the condition you are being treated for. If you have AF, anticoagulation with a DOAC will usually continue long-term.

If this is your first DVT or PE, you will usually take a DOAC for 3-6 months.

For recurrent blood clots, you may need to have DOAC treatment long-term. Your doctor will discuss this with you and confirm how long you need to continue your treatment for.

## **How do you take the medicine?**

This will depend on the particular DOAC you have been prescribed. Each medicine comes in various strengths and doses. Please follow the dosage instructions given by your doctor, nurse or pharmacist. Your medication box will be labelled with the correct dosage for you. You should take your medicine at the same time every day, with or after food if advised.

## **What if you miss a dose?**

If you miss a dose, take it as soon as you remember, but do not double up on the total daily dose. Please refer to the information leaflet supplied with your medicine for specific information, or call our Pharmacy Medicines Helpline for advice (contact details at the end of this leaflet).

## **Are there any side effects?**

Bleeding is the most common side effect of DOACs, as they increase the time it takes for your blood to clot.

Seek medical advice immediately if you:

- suffer a head injury
- have prolonged nosebleeds
- have blood in your urine, stools (including black, tar-like stools) or vomit (are sick)
- have unexplained or severe bruising or bleeding

If you have bleeding from a wound:

- **Apply pressure** to the wound
- **Go to the Emergency Department (A&E)** if the bleeding does not stop within 10 minutes.

## What about your other medicines?

Your medicines will be reviewed when you are first prescribed a DOAC, and any necessary changes will be made.

Medicines including vitamin supplements, herbal remedies and over-the-counter medicines may interact with DOACs, so it is important that you:

- check with a pharmacist before starting or stopping any medicines
- avoid taking any other medicines that may increase your risk of bleeding (such as aspirin or ibuprofen), unless your doctor has specifically prescribed them for you.

If you need a painkiller, paracetamol and codeine are acceptable.

Remember to tell other healthcare professionals looking after you that you are taking a DOAC. This includes anyone who prescribes you medication, reviews your medication or carries out a procedure, for example a dentist.

## **Do you need to change your diet or alcohol intake?**

You do not need to change what you eat when taking a DOAC. You should maintain a healthy and balanced diet. DOACs are not directly affected by alcohol. We recommend that you do not exceed the safe limits of alcohol (14 units each week), as this can increase your risk of bleeding.

## **Are DOACs safe in pregnancy?**

It is not advisable to become pregnant if you have a DVT or PE or while taking a DOAC. Tell your doctor straight away if you become pregnant, as you will need to change to a different medication.

## **Will you have a follow-up?**

Shortly after starting treatment, you may have an appointment at the hospital. This is to make sure that you are not experiencing any problems with your new medicine. Your GP will order routine tests at least once a year to check your kidneys, and for side effects.

## **Useful sources of information?**

The MedTap app allows patient and carers to access short videos providing similar information to that discussed during consultations.

Alternatively, please visit **w:**  
[www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/anticoagulation](http://www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/anticoagulation)

Always speak to a doctor before you stop taking your medicine.

## Contact us

If you have any concerns about your medicines, please talk to your doctor or a pharmacist, or you can call our Pharmacy Medicines Helpline, **t:** 020 7188 8748, Monday to Friday, 9am-5pm.

We recommend that you always carry an anticoagulant card with you in case of emergency. If you do not already have the card, please ask your pharmacist for one.

For more information leaflets on conditions, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit **w:** [www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/leaflets](http://www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/leaflets)

## Your comments and concerns

For advice, support or to raise a concern, contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS). To make a complaint, contact the complaints department.

**t:** 020 7188 8801 (PALS) **e:** [pals@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:pals@gstt.nhs.uk)

**t:** 020 7188 3514 (complaints)

**e:** [complaints2@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:complaints2@gstt.nhs.uk)

**Leaflet number: 5106/VER1**

Date published: November 2020

Review date: November 2023

© 2020 Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust

A list of sources is available on request