Direct oral anticoagulants (DOACs) for the treatment of deep vein thrombosis (DVT) and pulmonary embolism (PE)

This leaflet aims to answer your questions about DOACs that may be prescribed for you when you are diagnosed with a DVT or a PE. Always read the leaflet that comes with your medicine and speak to your doctor, nurse or pharmacist if you have any questions or concerns.

What are DOACs?
DOACs such as apixaban, dabigatran, edoxaban and rivaroxaban are medicines that prevent your blood from clotting as quickly, and make you less likely to develop new blood clots.

Why have I been prescribed a DOAC?
You have been prescribed a DOAC because you have a clot in either your:
- deep vein – these usually occur in the legs but can occur in any of the deep veins such as the arm or the abdomen. This type of clot is known as a deep vein thrombosis (DVT); or
- blood vessel in your lungs – this is known as a pulmonary embolism (PE).

DOACs will treat the clot by preventing it from getting any larger. If the clot is in the deep veins it will prevent it from breaking off and travelling to the lungs. It will also prevent new clots from forming.

Are there any alternatives?
Warfarin is the main alternative to DOACs. Warfarin has been used to treat clots for many years. If you have had a clot in the past you may have been prescribed warfarin. However, new DOACs are now available and can be used instead of warfarin.

Unlike warfarin, DOACs are used at fixed doses and do not need close monitoring of blood levels. Before you start taking a new anticoagulant, your consultant will discuss the risks and benefits of the different treatments with you. Please ask them if you have any questions. It is important that you choose a medicine that suits you best.

How long will I need to take a DOAC for?
This will depend on your individual condition. If this is your first DVT or PE, then you will usually take a DOAC for 3-6 months. For recurrent DVTs or PEs you may need to take a DOAC long-term. Your doctor will discuss this with you and confirm how long you need to continue your treatment for.
How do I take DOACs?
The dose and frequency (how often you need to take the medicine) will depend on which anticoagulant has been prescribed for you. This will be explained to you and will also be written on the medicine label and on your discharge letter. Please make sure you understand how to take the medicine, and ask if you have any questions.

What should I do if I forget to take my medicine?
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 leaflet supplied with your medicine for specific information, or call our Pharmacy Medicines Helpline for advice (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.

Please seek medical advice immediately if you suffer a significant blow to the head or have been involved in an accident, or if you have any of the following:
- prolonged nosebleeds (over 10 minutes)
- unusual headaches
- blood in your urine, stools or vomit
- black stools
- unexplained or severe bruising.

If you cut yourself, apply pressure as you normally would. It may take longer for the wound to stop bleeding. If the bleeding does not stop within 10 minutes, go to your local Emergency Department (A&E).

If you would like information on other side effects reported with DOACs, please see the manufacturer’s information leaflet that comes with the medicine.

What about my other medicines?
Your medicines will be reviewed when you are first prescribed a DOAC, and any necessary changes will be made. Other medicines (including herbal remedies and over-the-counter medicines) may interact with DOACs. It is important that you check with a pharmacist or doctor before starting any new medicines or stopping any existing ones.

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. Be aware that medicines bought in pharmacies can contain other ingredients – please speak to you pharmacist if you are unsure.

You must let other healthcare professionals treating you know that you are taking a DOAC. This includes anyone who prescribes you medication or carries out a procedure, for example a dentist.
Do I need to change my 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 of 14 units per week for both men and women, as this can increase your risk of bleeding.

What if I become pregnant or plan to become pregnant?
It is not advisable to become pregnant if you have a DVT or a PE. It is also not advisable to become pregnant if you are taking DOACs because the safety of DOACs in pregnancy is unknown, if you do become pregnant tell your doctor straight away as you will need to switch to an alternative treatment immediately.

Will I have a follow-up appointment?
Shortly after starting treatment, you will be seen by a thrombosis specialist in the Haemostasis and Thrombosis Centre at Guy’s Hospital. You will then see a thrombosis consultant for further assessment shortly after.

Transfer of care to your GP
DOACs will be started by a consultant at Guy’s and St Thomas’. After three months you may not need to continue treatment. If you do, your GP will take over your care. However, if this is not possible, your hospital consultant will remain responsible for prescribing your medicine.

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

Contact us
If you have any questions or concerns about your medicines, please talk to your doctor, nurse or a pharmacist. Alternatively, you can call our Pharmacy Medicines Helpline (please see details below) or the Haemostasis and Thrombosis Centre at St. Thomas’ Hospital.

Do not stop taking your medicine without talking to a doctor first.

For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/leaflets

Pharmacy Medicines Helpline
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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.

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