NATIONAL STROKE ASSOCIATION®

Treating Atrial Fibrillation (AFib) with Anticoagulants

A DECISION-MAKING TOOL

This decision-making tool is designed to help you work with your healthcare team to make the best decisions about treating AFib with an anticoagulant medication. Using this tool, you can work with your doctor to determine whether you are a good candidate for this medication. You can also better understand the possible side effects, including bleeding risk, and the steps you can take to control that risk.

Whether you have been diagnosed with AFib and want to prevent a stroke — or you experienced a stroke and then learned you have AFib – this tool can help you create a well-balanced care plan and stay healthy.

WHY TREAT WITH anticoagulants

To treat AFib, doctors may prescribe rate control medication to control your heart rate, or rhythm control medication to put your heart rate back in rhythm.

Doctors may also prescribe anticoagulant medications, which prevent blood from clotting and control blood thickness. This is important because AFib can cause blood to pool and clot in the heart's upper chambers (the atria), increasing the risk of stroke.

HOW DO ANTICOAGULATION medications work?

Anticoagulation medications work by altering the body's ability to control blood flow and regulate clotting. Some anticoagulants prevent the functioning of Vitamin K, which is involved in creating proteins in the liver that allow blood to clot.

There are also novel oral anticoagulants, or NOACs, that directly inhibit the functioning of thrombin or activated factor X (Xa), which also play a role in blood clotting.

Anticoagulation therapy has been found to reduce the risk of stroke in people with AFib by approximately 68%

SHOULD I TAKE THIS **medication?**

To determine if anticoagulants are the right course of treatment for you, your doctor will assess your medical history. Answering these questions will help your doctor determine whether to prescribe this medication.

What is your age? _____

Do you have other risk factors for stroke? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Do you have any of the following conditions:

- ☐ High blood pressure
- ☐ History of stroke
- ☐ Kidney problems
- ☐ Liver disease
- ☐ Cancer
- ☐ Alcoholism
- ☐ Can you take anticoagulation medication safely?
- ☐ Are you taking other medications for the treatment of AFib?
- ☐ Are you pregnant or is there a chance you could be pregnant?
- ☐ Are you able to make and go to regular follow-up appointments to monitor the medication's effects?

WHAT DO I NEED **to be aware of?**

Anticoagulants are effective for preventing clots. However, there are important aspects of the medication to keep in mind. Regular blood tests may be needed to monitor anticoagulants.

In addition, there is increased risk of bleeding. This means it can be more difficult to stop bleeding if you get a cut. The increased risk can also lead to bruising, general weakness, fatigue, and bleeding after brushing or flossing your teeth. The primary danger is fatal bleeding after a physical injury, or internal bleeding.

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO TAKE **anticoagulants safely?**

By being aware of the side effects of anticoagulants and taking precautions, you can manage your risk and be able to stay on the medication, which reduces your chance of stroke. Review these actions you can take, and put a checkmark next to the ones you would like to talk to your doctor about.

Monitoring the Medication

- ☐ **Blood tests.** A blood test called Prothrombin time (PT) measures the effect of warfarin-type oral anticoagulants on a scale called the International Normalized Ratio (INR). Once the INR becomes consistent on warfarin therapy, test your blood monthly to make sure your INR stays in the therapeutic range: 2.0 and 3.0.
- ☐ **Diet.** Monitor your intake of Vitamin K, which can affect how warfarin works. Vitamin K can be found in green leafy vegetables along with olives, olive oil, and some nuts and legumes.
- ☐ **Pay attention.** Be vigilant for signs of excess oral anticoagulant in your system such as excessive menstrual bleeding, coughing up blood (red or dark red), severe headache or stomach ache, dizziness or weakness, or blood in the urine or bowel movements.

Reducing Risk

- ☐ **Practice safety.** To prevent bleeding, take extra precautions to protect the skin when you're cooking, using knives, or gardening. Wear gloves and avoid cuts and nicks. Be careful when trimming hair or nails and shaving. Consider using an electric shaver instead of a straight razor.
- ☐ **Be consistent.** Take the dosage of your medication recommended by your healthcare provider at the same time each day. If you miss a dose, consult your doctor.
- ☐ **Check active ingredients.** Avoid taking drugs that increase your risk of bleeding, like aspirin, ibuprofen (Advil), Naproxen (Aleve), multivitamins with Vitamin K, or certain antibiotics, unless specifically recommended by your doctor.

Stopping Bleeding

- ☐ **Keep first-aid supplies on hand.** If you are bleeding from a cut or scratch, be prepared to bandage and dress the wound as soon as possible. Carry supplies with you so that you can apply first-aid even when you're away from home.
- ☐ **Reverse the bleeding.** Some anticoagulant medications have reversal agents that can stop the bleeding. Ask your doctor if there is a specific reversal agent for the oral anticoagulant that has been prescribed for you.
- ☐ **Share your history.** Inform all healthcare providers, including your dentist, that you take an anticoagulant. And wear a Medical ID tag to let people know that you are at risk of bleeding as you take an anticoagulant medication.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR **Healthcare Team**

This tool may generate additional questions you'll want to ask your doctor.

These questions include:

- ☐ What lifestyle choices should I make to complement this medication?
- ☐ How will this medication interact with other medicines I may be taking?
- ☐ What are the implications of stopping the medicine after being on it?
- ☐ Are there any generic alternatives?
- ☐ Are prescription assistance programs available to me?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The National Stroke Association provides resources and tools like these to help people make informed decisions and be active advocates for their health. Together, we can reduce risk and prevent stroke.

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For additional information, visit: **www.stroke.org/bleeding-risk**