

October, 2001

PATIENT POWERline from the desk of Marie Savard, M.D.

RE: Coumadin

Dear Friends,

As promised, I am back this month to talk about the blood thinner Coumadin. Last month I shared with you the story about a patient who potentially saved the lives of hundreds of people by keeping records of her Coumadin blood test results (the INR test) and questioning her doctor when her blood tests "just didn't make sense". She had the courage to speak up and trust her instincts. It turns out a hospital laboratory made a simple error in calculating the INR results, causing doctors to prescribe much more Coumadin than was safe and necessary.

Do you know anyone taking Coumadin? Please share this information with anyone you know. Even if you are not taking Coumadin, the principles remain the same. For any medication you take, you must become an expert. Know the purpose and treatment goal for each medication. For example, if you are on a pill to lower your cholesterol, what is your target LDL cholesterol? Ask for original copies of all your blood test results and keep a file. (You can use The Savard Health Record, [http://www.dr.savard.com/system\\_record.htm](http://www.dr.savard.com/system_record.htm) , which will help you organize and understand your information. I even include a "test-results-at-a-glance" form for you to fill out and keep track of every important blood test and change in medication based on the result. No doctor's chart keeps your information as well organized and complete as you can).

Coumadin (generic name is warfarin)

Coumadin is commonly called an anticoagulant or "blood thinner". It is used to prevent blood clots from forming or to prevent an existing clot from getting larger. Treatment with Coumadin may last only weeks (for example, after hip replacement surgery to prevent blood clots from forming) or for a lifetime (someone who has atrial fibrillation or an artificial heart valve). Coumadin is NEVER given to pregnant women because it is not safe.

Your doctor determines the proper dose of Coumadin by monitoring your blood and coming up with an INR result. This test measures the degree of blood thinning achieved by the Coumadin dose you are taking and once you are stable, it is usually checked monthly. Even slight changes in your INR above or below the target range for your condition can be harmful (too low a reading means your blood isn't thin enough and blood clots could form - whereas too high could mean your blood is too thin and dangerous bleeding could occur). Research has shown that the more involved you are in the monitoring of your Coumadin, the safer and more effective the treatment will be.

So here's how to get involved!

#### WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

Before beginning Coumadin - or if you are already on Coumadin -here's what you need to know:

- \*Why has Coumadin been prescribed?
- \*What is the dosage and the color of the tablet?
- \*What is the treatment goal for me? What is my goal INR level you want to achieve for your condition? (a common target range is an INR of 2 to 3)
- \*Take Coumadin on a daily basis at approximately the same time.
- \*Double check your dose each day, your doctor may sometimes alternate different doses on alternate days.
- \*Keep a continuous record of every dose you take and any doses you miss (The Savard Health Record, [http://www.dr.savard.com/system\\_record.htm](http://www.dr.savard.com/system_record.htm) ,provides a form for you to use).
- \*If you miss a dose one day, don't double the next day's dose unless you check first with your doctor.
- \*Call your doctor to stop or adjust the Coumadin before ANY surgery, including dental surgery or colonoscopy.

- \*Avoid dangerous activities that could lead to injury and excessive bleeding.
- \*Minimize your drinking but if you do drink, take the same amount of alcohol each day. Binge drinking may thin your blood too much.
- \*Follow a balanced and consistent diet each day (eating foods high in vitamin K such as spinach will interfere with Coumadin's effect and you may need more Coumadin as a result, so stick to the same food types every day)
- \*Talk to your doctor before starting or stopping ANY medication, vitamins or herbs. All medications have the potential to affect the dose of Coumadin. Antibiotics are notorious for increasing your INR result and could cause dangerous bleeding as a result. Aspirin and other anti-inflammatory medications like ibuprofen could also interfere with blood clotting and could be dangerous to take if you are on Coumadin).
- \*Don't take daily vitamins if they contain vitamin K. Ask your pharmacist which ones are okay for you to take.

## SYMPTOMS THAT YOU SHOULD REPORT IMMEDIATELY

There are certain situations that should prompt you to call your doctor right away. If your doctor is not available, go to an emergency room. You may need to be monitored and treated. The effect of Coumadin can be reversed with a vitamin K shot or infusion of plasma. Here are some examples of situations that could happen that need immediate attention:

- \*Bleeding from anywhere that will not easily stop
- \*A serious fall, injury or blow to the head
- \*Visible blood in your urine or stool
- \*Bruises that occur without bumping (no apparent cause)
- \*Severe headache or dizziness that persists

## FOODS HIGH IN VITAMIN K

Here is a list of foods high in Vitamin K. You don't need to avoid these foods, but rather make them part of your balanced diet. If you eat them only sporadically, your INR test could fluctuate as a result.

Broccoli  
 Brussel Sprouts  
 Cabbage  
 Swiss Chard  
 Collard greens  
 Cucumber  
 Endive  
 Kale  
 Mustard greens  
 Bib lettuce, red leaf lettuce  
 lots of mayonnaise, Canola or soybean oil (7 Tablespoons or more)  
 Green onion  
 Spinach  
 Turnip greens  
 Watercress

## FLU SEASON IS JUST AROUND THE CORNER

**ALERT:** those over 65, with any chronic lung, heart or kidney condition, health care workers and anyone else who needs protection from the flu!!!

The flu shot should be available by the end of October, so make an appointment for your shot early!!

## NEXT MONTH

Next month I will talk more about the flu season. What is the flu or influenza? Who should get the flu shot? Are there any risks or side effects...and much, much more.

Here's to your health,

Marie Savard, M.D.

To learn more about how to get involved more fully in your own health care please visit my web site at <http://www.DrSavard.com>. Please feel free to share this message with your friends and family. I would also welcome your stories and questions, <http://www.info@DrSavard.com>.

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