

## Blood Thinners Interact with Many Natural and Herbal Medicines

The drug warfarin (Coumadin) is often called a “blood thinner” because it interrupts a series of events necessary for blood to form clots. Warfarin is prescribed to treat many conditions associated with blood clots, and its use can be life-saving. Blood clots inside blood vessels are dangerous because they can prevent blood from carrying oxygen and other nutrients to cells beyond the clot. This causes cells on the other side of the blood clot to die. If blood vessels in the brain become blocked, for example, a stroke will result. Similarly, blockage of blood vessels to the heart can lead to a heart attack.

If you have been prescribed warfarin, having just the right amount of drug in your body is extremely important. Warfarin is said to have a narrow “window” of safety since either too much or too little of the drug can be deadly. Too little warfarin results in clots forming, whereas too much warfarin can cause you to bleed excessively. Patients who take warfarin need to have



their blood’s ability to clot checked as often as every week.

The level of warfarin in your body is affected by other medicines you take and by the foods you eat. Many drugs affect the way that warfarin is processed or distributed within the body. Some drugs increase warfarin’s effects; other drugs reduce its level in your body, thereby decreasing its benefits. In addition, when you take warfarin, you should not make any major changes to your diet. Foods containing large amounts of vitamin K can make warfarin less effective (examples of some of these foods are shown in Box 1). Unfortunately, patients often misunderstand and think that they cannot eat any of these foods, but that is not the case. You just need to keep your intake of these foods constant so that the warfarin dose can be adjusted appropriately.

Although patients taking warfarin are often aware that drugs and foods might affect the lev-

### EXAMPLES OF FOODS RICH IN VITAMIN K

Brussels sprouts  
Spinach  
Turnip greens  
Broccoli  
Endive lettuce  
Romaine lettuce  
Asparagus

Based on “Prevalence of Use and Risk of Adverse Effects Associated with Complementary and Alternative Medicine in Patients Receiving Warfarin” by Vivian WY Leung, Stephen J Shalansky, Melissa K Lo, and Esther A Jadusingsh, *The Annals of Pharmacotherapy*, May 2009, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1345/aph.1L631>. For Our Patients is provided by *The Annals* to help explain the latest research and information relating to your medications. These summaries are for informational purposes only and are not a substitute for professional advice from your personal medical provider. If you have questions about this material, you should discuss it with your physician or pharmacist. This summary may be reproduced without permission for not-for-profit educational purposes only. Any other use must be approved by the publisher. © Copyright 2009, Harvey Whitney Books Company, [www.hwbooks.com](http://www.hwbooks.com).

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el of warfarin in the body, some of them may not realize that herbal and natural medicines (H/NM) can also change the body's warfarin level. A recent survey found that 20 of the most common H/NM products are used by 55% of women and 43% of men between ages 57 to 85 years. Since individuals within this age range are also the most likely to be prescribed warfarin, researchers set out to determine how often people who take warfarin also use H/NM.

A total of 314 individuals taking prescription warfarin were interviewed to find out about their use of H/NM during the previous month. Of this group, 139 patients (44%) reported using H/NM at least once a week, and 107 (34%) had used a H/NM known to interact with warfarin (such as vitamin E, chamomile, garlic, coenzyme Q10, and Ginkgo biloba). These results suggest that many patients are not aware that H/NM can influence the effects of the warfarin they are taking.

Previous studies have found that more than 60% of patients do not tell their doctor that they take H/NM. Without knowing this, physicians cannot make appropriate dose adjustments to warfarin. If you are taking warfarin, be sure to tell your doctor about all the prescription medicines, over-the-counter medicines, and H/NM that you take. Having your healthcare provider know this information might actually save your life.

#### **FOR MORE INFORMATION**

Agency for Healthcare Quality and Research  
[www.ahrq.gov/consumer/coumadin.htm](http://www.ahrq.gov/consumer/coumadin.htm)

Mayo Clinic  
[www.mayoclinic.com/print/warfarin-side-effects/HB00101/METHOD=print](http://www.mayoclinic.com/print/warfarin-side-effects/HB00101/METHOD=print)