

RGH Pharmacy E-Bulletin

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A joint initiative of the Patient Services Section and the Drug and Therapeutics Information Service of the Pharmacy Department, Repatriation General Hospital, Daw Park, South Australia. The RGH Pharmacy E-Bulletin is distributed in electronic format on a weekly basis, and aims to present concise, factual information on issues of current interest in therapeutics, drug safety and cost-effective use of medications.

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Patient education with oral anticoagulants

There are several clinical indications for oral anticoagulation, including the prevention or treatment of venous thromboembolism such as deep vein thrombosis (DVT) and pulmonary embolism (PE) and the prevention of thromboembolism in patients with prosthetic heart valves. In more recent times, much more warfarin is being prescribed for the purpose of prevention of thromboembolic strokes in patients with atrial fibrillation – for many elderly patients this can mean that extended treatment with oral anticoagulants is prescribed. Although oral anticoagulants are potentially life-saving, treatment-related adverse outcomes are quite common and can have serious sequelae. As is the case for other medications, treatment with oral anticoagulants can be made safer if patients are educated about their treatment. Advantages include an increased likelihood of adherence to the prescribed treatment regimen and increased awareness and early detection of adverse effects. A range of issues should be addressed when providing education to patients about anticoagulation:

Informing health professionals

Patients should be instructed to inform all health care professionals during consultations for any purpose. A record of anticoagulant therapy (e.g. on a medication card, use of an anticoagulant handbook, or using a “medic-alert” bracelet) can be helpful for this purpose. Patients should be instructed to inform any doctor, pharmacist, dentist, or nurse they consult that they are being treated with anticoagulants, as this may influence treatment decisions and recommendations. Specific instructions will be needed in the event that any form of surgery is anticipated.

Understanding the INR

Providing a patient-oriented explanation of the nature and purpose of the INR helps to re-enforce the need for regular blood tests and can help to prevent episodes of over-anticoagulation. It is useful to explain the need to balance the extent to which the blood is “thinned” to protect against blood clotting, vs. the need to prevent over-anticoagulation and the associated risk of bleeding. This type of discussion also helps to explain the need for variable dosing, adjusted to the INR. Using a hand-held record of INR results (such as a patient handbook) can assist.

Abnormal bleeding

A plain-language explanation of the signs of abnormal bleeding can assist patients to identify over-anticoagulation, with the aim of preventing major haemorrhage. Patients should be counselled to seek medical assistance in the event of signs that might indicate haematuria, malaena or haemoptysis, as well as extensive bruising or nosebleeds, or other signs of unusual bleeding.

Medications

Many drugs interact with oral anticoagulant therapy, and it is difficult (and probably unnecessary) to cover all of the potential interactions during counselling. Issues such as appropriate choice of pain relief and the need for caution during antibiotic treatment will need to be addressed. Patients should be advised to check with their pharmacist or doctor before starting any new medication, including OTC products and complementary medicines.

Alcohol intake and diet

The importance of modest alcohol use and a balanced diet needs to be discussed during counselling.

This E-Bulletin is based on the elements included in the RGH Pharmacy Anticoagulation Handbook, which is available for purchase by health professionals. Email enquiries to chris.alderman@rgh.sa.gov.au

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FOR FURTHER INFORMATION – CONTACT THE PHARMACY DEPARTMENT ON 82751763 or email: chris.alderman@rgh.sa.gov.au
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