

How to Reduce Your Bleeding Risk: Patients on Warfarin and a Second Blood Thinner

Patients who are prescribed 2 or more blood-thinning medications have an increased risk for bleeding from the stomach or intestines. Examples of blood-thinning medications include:

- Warfarin
- Aspirin
- Clopidogrel (Plavix®)
- Ticagrelor (Brilinta®)
- Prasugrel (Effient®)

Blood-thinning medications can be lifesaving, so **you should never change or stop these medications without talking to your doctor first**. However, these medications also have some risks.

- Using 2 or more blood-thinning medications together can increase your risk of bleeding from your stomach or intestines (**gastrointestinal bleeding**).
- For each blood-thinning medication you use regularly, the risk of gastrointestinal bleeding almost doubles. This is true even for 81 mg of aspirin (“baby aspirin”).
- For patients who use warfarin, gastrointestinal bleeding is the most common type of serious bleeding. Out of 100 patients who are treated for 10 years with warfarin and a second blood-thinning medication, about 30 patients will have gastrointestinal bleeding.

What options do I have to reduce my risk of bleeding from the stomach or intestines?

Option 1: Stop one of your blood-thinning medications

To reduce your bleeding risk, you may need to stop one of your blood-thinning medications (usually a drug like aspirin or clopidogrel (Plavix®)) and continue to take warfarin. **Please talk to your doctor before making any medication changes.**

- New studies show many patients who use warfarin can safely stop their second blood-thinning medication if they have not recently had a heart attack, stent, or stroke.

Option 2: Start a proton pump inhibitor medication

To reduce your bleeding risk, you may need to start a medication called a **proton pump inhibitor (PPI)**, like omeprazole (Prilosec®). This is the best option for patients who need to take 2 or more blood-thinning medications.

- PPIs reduce the risk of gastrointestinal bleeding by nearly two-thirds. You can learn more about PPIs on page 4.

Your doctor can help you decide which option is best for you. You can start by contacting the doctor who manages your aspirin, clopidogrel, ticagrelor, or prasugrel.

Common questions about gastrointestinal bleeding

What causes bleeding from the stomach and intestines (gastrointestinal bleeding)?

The most common cause is irritation in the lining of the stomach or intestines caused by medications, including aspirin and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) like ibuprofen (Motrin®) and naproxen (Aleve®). This irritation from medications can sometimes cause an **ulcer**, which is a

sore that can bleed. For patients who use blood-thinning medications, any irritation or ulcer is more likely to cause gastrointestinal bleeding.

Does diet affect my risk of gastrointestinal bleeding?

What you eat does not change your risk of gastrointestinal bleeding.

However, drinking alcohol does increase your risk. It is important that you follow instructions about eating and drinking from the anticoagulation clinic to keep your **INR (international normalized ratio)** stable.

Do I need to worry about my risk of gastrointestinal bleeding if I'm not having any symptoms?

Many patients have no symptoms before having gastrointestinal bleeding. Some patients may have stomach upset or nausea. It's important to think about how you can reduce your bleeding risk even if you're not having symptoms.

What are the signs of gastrointestinal bleeding, and how serious is it?

Symptoms of gastrointestinal bleeding include:

- Feeling faint or short of breath
- Having red vomit or vomit that looks like coffee grounds
- Having stool (poop) that looks black, like tar, or red

If you have these symptoms, it can be an emergency and you may need to go to the hospital.

What should I do if I think I have gastrointestinal bleeding?

1. **Call 911** if you have dizziness, light-headedness, fainting, shortness of breath, fatigue (tiredness), or any other unusual symptoms.
2. Call your healthcare provider and the anticoagulation clinic at (734) 998-6944. You may need to have your INR tested or other tests to figure out the cause of the bleeding.

Proton pump inhibitors (PPIs)

What is a proton pump inhibitor (PPI) medication?

Proton pump inhibitors (PPIs) are a type of acid-blocking medication. They are often used to treat heartburn, and they are also very effective for preventing gastrointestinal bleeding. They turn off your body's "pumps" that produce acid in your stomach. Some examples of PPIs include omeprazole (Prilosec®) and pantoprazole (Protonix®).

How much do PPIs reduce my risk for bleeding?

For patients who use 2 or more blood-thinning medications, PPIs can reduce the risk of gastrointestinal bleeding by almost two-thirds (or about 67%) when taken every day.

- PPIs are so effective for preventing bleeding that the American College of Cardiology Foundation and the American Heart Association recommend them for patients using 2 blood-thinning medications.

What are the side effects of PPI medications?

Most patients have no side effects from taking PPIs. Some patients may experience stomach pain, diarrhea, or headache.

How can I get PPI medications?

PPIs are available over-the-counter and by prescription.

- Through some prescription discount programs, PPIs may cost very little each month. Some insurance programs will also cover the cost of PPI medications.
- You can visit websites like GoodRX.com or CostPlusDrugs.com for coupons or talk to your pharmacist about other discount programs.

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Authors: Jacob Kurlander, MD, Danielle Helminski, MPH, Geoffrey Barnes, MD, Tina Alexandris-Souphis, RN BSN BS

Edited by: Brittany Batell, MPH MSW

Information on when to seek immediate medical attention based on recommendations from Michigan Medicine departments of Gastroenterology, Urology, and Obstetrics and Gynecology physicians

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