

Family Medicine Clerkship Plain Language Summary

Title

Blood Thinners: Which one is right for me?

Name

Jason S. Prudom

Plain Language Summary

Were you or a loved one recently diagnosed with atrial fibrillation? Do the doctors think you need to be on drugs to prevent blood clots from forming? These drugs are commonly called blood thinners. This is a summary about two blood thinners: warfarin and dabigatran.

Atrial fibrillation is when the two upper chambers of the heart quiver, instead of beat in a coordinated fashion with the two lower chambers of the heart. Blood clots can be easily formed with a condition such as atrial fibrillation and the blood clots can cause major damage such as a stroke or heart attack. This is why it is important to take blood thinners if you have atrial fibrillation. Warfarin has been around since the 1950's and is still the most commonly used blood thinner. It is cheap (less than a dollar per day) and does a good job of not letting blood clots form. However, sometimes it thins the blood too much and can cause a major internal bleed that could result in death. Another drawback to warfarin is that it is hard to dose correctly. This is why when someone is taking warfarin, they have to get frequent check-ups (usually monthly) and have their blood drawn to see if the level of warfarin is in a good range.

Dabigatran is a newer drug that works in a different way to thin the blood. In a recent study, dabigatran was shown to decrease the chance of stroke and the chance of blood clots forming when compared against warfarin. The side effect of major internal bleeding is also decreased with dabigatran. The overall risk of dying from treatment with dabigatran is lower than treatment with warfarin. It should be noted that treatment with both drugs decreases the risk of death from atrial fibrillation as compared to no treatment. Another advantage that dabigatran has over warfarin is the monthly check-ups are not required for dabigatran. Right now the biggest drawback to dabigatran is its cost. Since it is a new drug, the pharmaceutical company is charging much more for it. The cost for treatment with dabigatran is roughly between \$7 and \$10 per day and most insurance companies will not cover this price difference.

In addition to these two drugs, there are a number of other blood thinners available. It is important for you to talk to your doctor and your insurance to figure out which blood thinning medication is right for you.

Additional Resources

<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/atrial-fibrillation/DS00291>

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/bloodthinners.html>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anticoagulant>

Key Words

Atrial fibrillation

Blood thinners

Warfarin

Dabigatran

Anticoagulant

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