



Situational Safety: Herbal Supplements

Patients on warfarin who also use alternative medicines may increase the risk of dangerous drug interactions. Alternative medicines include botanicals, herbal supplements, root extracts, seed oils, leaves, bee venom, and bark. Sometimes called “holistic”, these products are often promising but lack scientific evidence. The use of herbal and dietary supplements is dramatically increasing. Many of the most common supplements are thought to potentially increase the risk of adverse events for warfarin patients.¹

The average warfarin patient takes between 4 and 6 other prescription medicines in addition to warfarin.² Many patients also use non-prescription alternative medicines, or natural products, looking for improved health and increased quality of life.

There are over 38,000,000 Internet sites related to “herbal products”. Buying herbal and dietary supplements is easy, and too often patients fail to check with their doctor before taking them in combination with prescription medications.

Patients are encouraged to exercise caution when using herbal supplements because they can interact with warfarin. Herbal supplements are marketed in the absence of consistent manufacturing standards, and the amount of active ingredients is allowed to vary. This inconsistency could further increase the risk of side effects in patients taking warfarin. More frequent testing is recommended when starting or stopping any herbal or dietary supplements.³

Some over-the-counter botanicals (such as garlic and Ginko biloba) may increase risk of bleeding and raise an INR test result, while others may decrease the effect of warfarin thus lowering INR test results.³ Patients cannot feel increases or decreases in INR values. Patients should discuss the desire to take any over-the-counter medication with a physician, especially alternative medicines.

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- 1 Shalansky, S. et al. (2007). Risk of warfarin-related bleeding events and supratherapeutic internal normalized ratios associated with complimentary and alternative medicine: a longitudinal analysis. *Pharmacotherapy*, 27(9), 1237-1247.
- 2 Brandeis University Schneider Institute for Health Policy. (2001). Health Improvement Report (Winter ed.) [Brochure]. Irving, TX : AdvancePCS.
- 3 Bristol-Myers Squibb Company. (2007). *Medication Guide for Coumadin Tablets and Coumadin for Injection* [Package Insert]. Princeton, NJ: Bristol-Myers Squibb Company.

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