On Coumadin? Tell Your Doctor If You Love Spinach or Take Fish Oils

Q. I take Coumadin. Should I worry about interactions with foods and drugs?

A. Yes. A recent report in the Archives of Internal Medicine indicates that there are more potential interactions between Coumadin and foods and Coumadin and other drugs than previously thought. However, you don’t necessarily need to eliminate suspect foods from your diet, just maintain a consistent intake and be sure your doctor knows about significant changes in your diet. Here’s why.

How Warfarin Works. Coumadin is the brand name for the drug warfarin, the most commonly prescribed oral anticoagulant (blood thinner) in the U.S. It’s used to prevent blood clots in people with heart disease, ischemic stroke, irregular heartbeats and artificial heart valves, for example. Clotting starts with vitamin K, which is required for the activation of several blood clotting factors. Doctors prescribe Coumadin because it reduces the amount of active vitamin K and interferes with the cascade of events that clots blood.

The effectiveness and safety of the drug are directly related to proper dosage, so your doctor will monitor your blood level of Coumadin and fine-tune the dose as needed, often because of medications, alcohol, liver disease or changes in diet.

Foods to Monitor. Because green leafy vegetables are rich in vitamin K, people taking Coumadin are sometimes told to avoid these veggies. But that’s not nutritionally wise or necessary. What you need to avoid is drastic changes in dietary sources of vitamin K. Suddenly eating a lot of spinach or kale, for example, might decrease Coumadin’s effectiveness.

Experts suggest eating no more than 1/2 cup per day of cooked spinach, kale, turnip greens or collards, or no more than 1 1/2 cups of Brussels sprouts or 3 cups of raw spinach, broccoli or Romaine. Other foods that may decrease Coumadin’s effectiveness include large amounts of avocado, soy milk, sushi made with seaweed, and green tea.

Foods that increase Coumadin’s blood-thinning action include mango, cranberry juice, grapefruit juice and alcohol (if you have liver disease). Keep your intake of all these foods moderate and as consistent in your diet as possible.

Supplements to Reveal. Any multivitamin that contains vitamin K will inhibit warfarin’s action to some degree. On the flip side, fish oil supplements and herbal preparations containing ginseng or dong quai may increase warfarin’s ability to prevent blood clotting, risking excessive bleeding.

Other Drugs of Which to Be Wary.

The list of drugs—Rx and over-the-counter—that interact with warfarin is long. Included, ironically, are some common cardiovascular drugs, such as statins, fibrates and aspirin, as well as nonsteroidal anti-inflammatories, such as ibuprofen (Motrin), Celebrex and Vioxx, which exacerbate warfarin’s effect on bleeding.

EN’s Bottom Line. Coumadin has been used safely for years. But because of the potential for interactions, be sure to tell your doctor which foods you eat regularly and all the medications you take, including supplements and over-the-counter preparations like aspirin. Check with your doctor and pharmacist before drastically changing your diet, taking a new supplement or refilling an old prescription.

Should You Queue Up for Good Health With Coenzyme Q10?

Q. I read recently that coenzyme Q10 might help prevent Parkinson’s disease. But isn’t it a treatment for heart disease?

A. Yes, but there has been research on lots of conditions testing the effectiveness of coenzyme Q10 (aka CoQ10 or simply CoQ), an antioxidant found naturally in most tissues of the body. CoQ, also known as ubiquinone, helps cells produce energy, particularly in the heart. CoQ supplements are promoted for treating heart disease, high blood pressure, cancer, AIDS, even to get rid of wrinkles.

Blood levels of CoQ drop with age and in people with heart disease and some types of cancer. Research shows CoQ can stimulate the immune system and protect the heart from damage caused by some chemotherapy drugs.

Parkinson’s Disease. This latest link comes from the University of California in San Diego. Researchers gave 80 adults with early-stage disease 300, 600 or 1,200 milligrams of CoQ plus 1,200 International Units of vitamin E a day. Those receiving the most CoQ showed the least disease progression over 16 months.

Heart Health. Animal studies have found that supplementing with CoQ10 helps protect against oxidative stress on the heart. Though human studies have shown positive results, they haven’t been well controlled. The strongest evidence for CoQ appears to be for the treatment of congestive heart failure.

Migraines. Research from the Cleveland Headache Center has found that among 31 migraine patients taking 150 milligrams of CoQ10 a day, 61% cut the number of migraine days by more than half. A recent well-controlled Swiss study with 100 milligrams of CoQ three times a day reported similar findings. In both studies, the beneficial effect was pronounced only after two to three months.

Cancer. There have been several reports of improvements and remission in patients taking CoQ10, but no well-controlled studies. Of worry are studies suggesting that CoQ could interfere with the effectiveness of some cancer treatments.

EN’s Bottom Line. Though CoQ supplements show promise, it’s not a supplement EN yet recommends. The only exception might be for congestive heart failure; discuss this with your doctor. Certainly, we do not recommend it if you are undergoing treatment for cancer, as CoQ may interfere with its effectiveness, or if you have diabetes, as there is evidence it may reduce insulin requirements.

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