

# Choosing a Blood Thinner for an Irregular Heartbeat: Comparing Effectiveness, Safety, and Price

## What is an irregular heartbeat?

It's a condition where your heart beats in a fast and uneven way. This happens because the electrical system that controls your heartbeat doesn't work properly.

This condition is also called atrial fibrillation (AFib). If you have AFib, you may need to take a blood thinner (anticoagulant). This fact sheet will help you choose one that is right for you.

## AFib can lead to stroke.

With AFib, blood clots may form in your heart. A blood clot can travel to your brain and block blood flow. This causes a stroke.

Blood flow can be blocked for a long time, or for just a few minutes. A very brief blockage is called a transient ischemic attack (TIA). It is a warning sign that you can have a more serious stroke in the future.

## What are blood thinners?

Blood thinners help prevent clots from forming in your blood. These drugs can reduce your risk of stroke. One of these drugs, warfarin, has been in use for many years. Others are newer. Each has pros and cons.

## Who needs blood thinners?

Not everyone with AFib needs a blood thinner. Blood thinners can prevent strokes, but they can also cause serious side effects, such as internal bleeding. Your doctor must look at the benefits and risks for you.

## How well do blood thinners work?

Each of the drugs we reviewed lowers the risk of stroke for people with AFib.

- Some newer drugs may work better than warfarin.
- Most doctors agree that more studies of the newer drugs are needed.
- Warfarin has shown that it works well over years. It is not known how well the newer drugs work over a long time.
- It's important to know how well a blood thinner works over time because you may need to take it for the rest of your life.

**Newer drugs may work as well as or better than warfarin. But only warfarin has shown it works well over time. Ask your doctor which drug is right for you.**

## How safe are blood thinners?

Blood-thinning drugs make bleeding worse. If you have serious internal bleeding, this can be dangerous. Doctors will need to stop the effects of the blood thinner quickly. With warfarin, doctors can stop the effects quickly. But with the newer drugs, they cannot.

Doctors know a lot about warfarin's safety because people have been taking it for years. Less is known about the effects of the newer drugs. It takes time to learn enough about a drug to recommend it.

## How much do blood thinners cost?

The newer drugs cost more than warfarin. But with warfarin, you may need frequent blood tests to check drug levels. These tests can add to your costs.

## Our advice:

We compared cost, safety, and how well the blood thinners work. We chose this drug as our *Consumer Reports Best Buy Drug*:

 **Warfarin** (Coumadin, Jantoven, and generic)

Warfarin works for most people. It has a proven track record and costs less than other drugs. But you may need frequent blood tests and a special diet. So warfarin may be less convenient than the newer drugs.

If warfarin does not work well for you, apixaban (Eliquis) may be a good option. In studies, it reduced strokes more than warfarin. And it may be slightly safer.



# Warfarin and the Newer Blood Thinners: Comparison Chart

Our evaluation is based in part on a scientific review conducted by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) and published in August, 2013.\* This fact sheet is based on a more detailed report that can be found at [www.CRBESTBUYDRUGS.org](http://www.CRBESTBUYDRUGS.org)\*\*

Drug	Available as a Generic?	Doses per Day	Benefits: Reduced Stroke vs. warfarin	Benefits: Reduced Deaths vs. warfarin	Risks: Major Bleeding vs. warfarin	Risks: Stomach & GI Bleeding vs. warfarin
Apixaban (Eliquis) 5 mg <sup>†</sup>	No	Two	Slightly better than warfarin	Slightly better than warfarin	Slightly better than warfarin	No difference
Dabigatran (Pradaxa) 150 mg <sup>††</sup>	No	Two	Slightly better than warfarin	No difference	No difference	More bleeding than warfarin
Dabigatran (Pradaxa) 110 mg <sup>†††</sup>	No	Two	No difference	No difference	Less bleeding than warfarin	No difference
Rivaroxaban (Xarelto) 20 mg	No	One	No difference	No difference	No difference	More bleeding than warfarin

\* A synopsis of AHRQ's report written by a medical consultant to Consumer Reports Best Buy Drugs forms the basis of this report. The consultant, at the Oregon Health & Science University's Drug Effectiveness Review Project, has no financial interest in any pharmaceutical company or product.

\*\* The *Consumers Reports Best Buy Drugs* methodology is described in detail in the Methods section at [www.CRBESTBUYDRUGS.org](http://www.CRBESTBUYDRUGS.org).

<sup>†</sup> 2.5 mg twice per day dose recommended for some people, including those over age 80.

<sup>††</sup> In patients with chronic kidney disease, the FDA-approved dose is half the regular dose.

<sup>†††</sup> The FDA has not approved this lower dose and there is disagreement about whether it could possibly be safer for patients aged 80 and over.

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