Managing medications is one of the most common responsibilities of unpaid caregivers who are helping family members or friends. This task can be particularly challenging when the medication is considered high risk. This episode of the Home Alone Alliance™ series on managing medications presents information about one frequently prescribed high-risk drug—warfarin. Warfarin is a generic name that covers brand-name versions of the drug.

Warfarin is often described, even by health care professionals, as a blood thinner. This is a common but inaccurate term. Warfarin does not thin blood; as an anticoagulant, it prevents blood from coagulating—that is, clotting. It is prescribed for people who have heart conditions like an irregular heartbeat called atrial fibrillation or heart valve problems. It is also prescribed for people who have had blood clots in their legs or lungs to prevent a recurrence and to people who are at risk of stroke.

**Risks of Warfarin**

Warfarin has clear benefits. Why then is warfarin considered a high-risk drug? There are several reasons. When taken with many other prescription and over-the-counter drugs, warfarin can lead to adverse side effects. Ordinary daily activities that accidentally result in injury may also lead to bleeding. If a person taking warfarin is cut or injured, it may take longer than usual for bleeding to stop.

If the dose is too high or the medication is not taken as directed, serious, even life-threatening, bleeding can result. Problems with bleeding related to warfarin are leading causes of emergency department visits and hospital admissions and readmissions.

For these reasons health care providers typically require frequent monitoring of the person’s blood levels. The test used to monitor the effects of warfarin is called the international normalized ratio, or INR. This is a blood test that measures how long it takes for blood to clot—the prothrombin or PT time. The higher the INR, the longer it will take blood to clot (and the higher the risk of bleeding). This test may be required every few days when warfarin is first prescribed and every few weeks from then on. This schedule may change if problems occur. Ask the health care provider about this aspect of managing warfarin.

Warfarin is not for everyone. People who have a history of bleeding disorders, anemia, kidney or liver disease, and other chronic conditions should give a complete medical history to the health care provider, who can then make an informed recommendation about taking warfarin.

**Taking Warfarin**

Now let’s turn to a daily routine and how as a caregiver you can help the person follow the health care provider’s directions. On the positive side:

> The dosage is marked on one side of the warfarin tablet, so you can always be sure you have the right dose.

> Warfarin tablets are scored—marked down the middle—so you can easily divide the pill in half if the dosage is changed.

Now for some of the challenges:

> Because warfarin should be taken at the same time each day, it is important to have a way to remind you or the person that it is time to take the drug. This can be a calendar, phone or computer reminder, a medi-set (a pill organizer with daily slots for pills), or some other device.

> Don’t skip a dose. If, despite your best efforts, the person misses a dose, don’t double the dose the next time. Ask the health care provider what to do in this case.
Warfarin interacts with vitamin K, which is found in green vegetables like kale, broccoli, and spinach. These healthy foods don’t have to be removed entirely from the person’s diet but should be served in small portions.

The person should use alcohol only occasionally.

Warfarin should be kept in a cool, dry place. Make sure you store this drug (and all drugs) in a place that is not accessible to children and pets. You can find helpful advice at the website of Up and Away, an organization devoted to medication safety that partners with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Go to www.upandaway.org/.

Avoid risk by reminding the person to do the following:

- Use a soft-bristled toothbrush that’s gentle on the gums.
- Shave with an electric razor.
- Handle sharp objects like knives or scissors carefully.
- Avoid risky activities that can lead to falls or injury.
- Wear gloves when using sharp tools or gardening.
- Wear shoes or nonskid slippers at home.
- Wear a medical alert bracelet.
- Tell all health care providers, including dentists, that you are taking warfarin, especially before any kind of surgery. (Note: As the family caregiver, you can let them know as well.)
- Keep an up-to-date list of all medications, including over-the-counter medications, supplements, and herbal preparations. Even common over-the-counter pain relievers, cold medications, and stomach remedies may interact with warfarin. Your pharmacist can be a valuable resource on determining the risks of other medications taken with warfarin.

Other Options
There are other, newer medication options that achieve a stable level of blood coagulation and that eliminate the need for regular blood testing. If you are having difficulty managing warfarin, ask the health care provider if there are other options that achieve the same results without as much risk.

Additional Resources
Medline Plus, a publication of the US National Library of Medicine, has comprehensive information on warfarin. Go to www.medlineplus.gov/druginfo/meds/a682277.html.

The federal Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality has a useful patient education booklet on anticoagulants (although it calls them “blood thinners”) at www.ahrq.gov/patients-consumers/diagnosis-treatment/treatments/btpills/btpills.html.

Drugs.com has easy-to-read patient instructions at www.drugs.com/warfarin.html. This website also has an interactive list of the 568 drugs that are known to interact with warfarin; 131 are major drug interactions, 364 are moderate, and 73 are minor.

There are many other videos and resource guides in this series. Go to www.aarp.org/nolongeralone for a complete listing.