

Digoxin

This information sheet is intended to help those affected by atrial fibrillation (AF) understand the medication digoxin, with a brief introduction to how it works, dosing and side effects.

Introduction

Digoxin belongs to a group of medicines called cardiac glycosides. It is used to treat arrhythmias and heart failure. An arrhythmia is an irregular heart rhythm, which causes the heart to skip a beat, beat irregularly or beat at the wrong speed. This can cause you to feel dizzy and breathless, and you may have chest pain and the sensation of having a 'thumping heart' (palpitations). Digoxin works by correcting irregular heartbeats to a normal rhythm and strengthens the force of the heart contraction, which is why it is useful in heart failure. When your heart rate is brought down to normal, your heart becomes efficient again and your symptoms usually improve.

Dosing

Digoxin is prescribed as a once daily medication. However, most people will find that the doctor asks you to take it twice daily at first to 'load' the body to speed up its initial effects. Only take medications as prescribed by your doctor. Inform your doctor of any other medications or herbal remedies you take as some may interfere with digoxin and its actions.

Side effects

Like all medications, digoxin has side effects, which may be experienced to different degrees by patients. Common side effects include:

- Nausea
- Diarrhoea
- Feeling weak or dizzy
- Headaches

Digoxin can present signs of toxicity (high levels of digoxin in the blood even though the dose taken has remained unchanged). The symptoms

of toxicity include vomiting, black stools, rash, blurred vision, visual disturbances (yellow-green halos around people or objects, described by some people as auras), confusion, drowsiness, nightmares and agitation. If you are concerned that your digoxin tablets may be causing problems such as this, it is important to seek medical advice promptly.

Monitoring

When used as directed, digoxin is an effective treatment which is considered suitable for long term use. However, an annual review with a doctor is recommended and if any side effects are experienced, seeking an early review with your clinician is advisable. Generally the effects of digoxin can be monitored just through physical examination (taking your pulse and blood pressure). Occasionally your doctor may ask for a blood test to be performed to check the level of the digoxin in the blood although this is not routine practice. While all drugs have the potential for adverse effects, toxicity is relatively rare when using digoxin in usual clinical practice.

To view our patient resources, scan the QR code below:



Acknowledgments: AF Association would like to thank all those who helped in the development and review of this publication. In particular, thanks are given to Dr Matthew Fay, Dr Andrew Grace, Mr Sotiris Antoniou, Dr Charlotte D'Souza and Dr Chris Arden