AF Association
843-415-1886
info@afa-us.org
www.afa-us.org

# Amiodarone advice

This factsheet is intended to help those affected by atrial fibrillation understand the medication amiodarone, with a brief introduction to how it works, dosing, and side effects.

Amiodarone is a medication that helps in the management of heart rhythm abnormalities. It is a very effective medication but can produce side effects which your doctor will need to monitor. Amiodarone is used to help keep the heart in its normal (sinus) rhythm. It is also used when the heart has changed its rhythm (arrhythmia) in order to help it return to normal rhythm.

## Side effects

Although generally well tolerated amiodarone does have side effects that can affect different parts of our body. Amiodarone contains iodine, so should not be taken by anyone who is allergic to iodine or by pregnant women. Amiodarone can be affected by grapefruit, so avoid having grapefruit or grapefruit juice.

## Skin

When taking amiodarone, the skin can take on a greyish/blue tinge. This will settle on stopping amiodarone but can take a long time.

While taking amiodarone, you may become more sensitive to sunburn. Using sunblock of SPF 30 or higher (ideally SPF 50) and hats appears to prevent this side effect. Because amiodarone remains in the body for a long time it may be necessary to continue using sun block for a few months after stopping the medication.

## Thyroid gland

The thyroid gland produces a hormone which controls the body's metabolism. Amiodarone can affect this gland making it both overactive (this occurs in about 2% of people taking amiodarone) or under active (this occurs in about 6% of people taking amiodarone). Your doctor will take regular blood tests to check if either of these has developed. An overactive thyroid can cause a range of symptoms, including anxiety, tiredness, dry skin, thinning hair, swelling of the neck, and weight loss.

An underactive thyroid can lead to weight gain, tiredness, dry skin and swelling in the neck. If you experience any of these symptoms, contact your doctor.

You will have a blood test every six months to check the levels of thyroid hormones and your amiodarone dose may be adjusted if necessary.

Both an overactive and underactive thyroid can easily be treated with medications.

## Eyes

Small deposits can form in the cornea of the eye (the clear surface that covers the pupil, iris and white of the eye). These deposits are not harmful although you may notice the effect of these eye deposits if looking at bright lights at nighttime e.g. when driving a car. Of people taking amiodarone one in ten will notice a bluish halo around their vision. Again, this is not harmful.

## Lungs

Amiodarone can cause an inflammation of the lungs, called pneumonitis, which if left to progress will lead eventually to permanent thickening of some of the lung structure (Fibrosis) leading to chronic breathlessness. If this is recognized early and the amiodarone is stopped and active treatment started this can be prevented. If you feel you have problems with shortness of breath you should arrange to see your general practitioner right away to commence investigation and possible treatment.

## Liver

Amiodarone is rarely associated with hepatotoxicity and treatment should be discontinued if severe liver function abnormalities or clinical signs of liver disease develop. Your doctor will check your liver function regularly with blood tests and adjust or stop amiodarone if needed.

## Monitoring

Amiodarone is a very useful medication and will only be prescribed in your best interest. The effects listed above, although not common, do mean that monitoring is important. You will need to be reviewed by your general practitioner every six months, while on amiodarone, and you will need blood tests to ensure that your thyroid and liver function are acceptable and that no other problems have developed, including any interaction with your INR level if taking warfarin.

Patients should not stop taking Amiodarone or change their dose without speaking to a doctor first. Amiodarone can take months to be excreted from the body so even once stopped, any side effects may persist for weeks to months afterwards.

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*endorsed by*

**Founder:** Trudie Lobban MBE, FRCP Edin
**Executive Director:** Francesca Lobban