

3.21 Cardiovascular health - Atrial fibrillation

Arnold aged 72 has just been discharged from hospital with a new diagnosis of atrial fibrillation. He has controlled hypertension. He has been started on apixaban.

Arnold: Why do I need to these tablets doc?

Provide: You have a problem called atrial fibrillation. Your heart beat is irregular and the pumping action of the heart is disorganised.

Elicit: Does that make sense?

Arnold: So why do I need the drugs? They told me in hospital that you used to use warfarin for this.

Provide: Atrial fibrillation can cause little clots to form in your heart. If this happens a piece of clot can break off and travel to your brain, causing a stroke.

Apixaban thins your blood and protects you from clots. Strokes are nasty and clearly worth preventing. But blood thinners like apixaban and warfarin make you more prone to bruising and bleeding.

Elicit: OK?

Provide: I can show you on this sparctool programme (www.sparctool.com), what the chances are, of having a clot in the next 10 years, with and without treatment. I can also show you what the risks are of you having a serious bleed, mostly from your gut, with and without treatment. Hopefully, that will help you to decide if you are happy to continue taking the blood thinning treatment.

This tool tells me that without treatment, your risk of having a clot in the next year would be 2.9% in 1 year and 29% in 10 years. With a blood thinner like apixaban that risk comes down to 8% in 10 years. But apixaban increases your risk of a big bleed (mostly from the gut but including brain bleeds), from 8% to 21% in 10 years. But many of these bleeds are more easy to treat than clots and strokes.

Elicit: What do you think?

Arnold: It looks like taking the apixaban is pretty good at protecting against strokes. I'd rather take my chances with a bleed than a stroke.