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I have an irregular heart rate and the consultant has recommended that I take warfarin tablets to cut my stroke risk. But I have to go for blood tests every week or two and my dose keeps changing. It's very worrying - is there an alternative?

A

You have a condition called atrial fibrillation (AF), which affects more than 750,000 people in the UK, and numbers are rising ever year. It can indeed increase your risk of stroke because of a blood clot, and that's why many people with AF take warfarin, which thins the blood. But if you take too much, it increases your risk of bleeding, and if you take too little, you're not protected. It can be really hard to get the dose right because warfarin interacts with everyday food and drink - for example, some vegetables, tea, coffee and alcohol. An exciting study suggests a new medicine called dabigatran is just as safe but more effective. It isn't affected by food and doesn't need to be monitored. It should be available in the next few months.