

## **Blood thinning medication requires careful monitoring**

By Georgia Brunette, D.O.

If you have had a heart condition or stroke, it's very likely that you have been prescribed the drug warfarin, which is also known as Coumadin. It's a medication that thins the blood so that clots don't form in the heart, lungs or other parts of the body.

Warfarin is a wonderful, powerful drug that has enhanced the lives of many patients who have had heart rhythm problems such as atrial fibrillation, strokes and blood clots or have mechanical heart valves.

Here at the Duluth Clinic-Superior, we have a successful, convenient, cost-efficient way to monitor our patients who take warfarin. It's our anticoagulation clinic, which serves about 350 patients who have been referred by SMDC physicians. It is open by appointment from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday.

Warfarin is taken by mouth, typically once a day after supper. If the people taking it are not monitored properly, their blood can become too thick or too thin, which can cause them to develop either blood clots or excessive bleeding.

That is why we send our warfarin patients to the anticoagulation clinic, where two specially trained nurses follow them.

Because there is no standard dose, patients taking warfarin start out by having their blood levels checked twice a week. The test involves a finger poke and results are available immediately. From that test, the nurse, who works closely with the patient's physician, adjusts the dose and tells the patient when to come back for another test.

Eventually, as the levels stabilize, the patient's visits become less frequent. Some patients only visit once a month if their blood stays at optimal levels. Our warfarin patients are always in touch with the clinic. Even those who go south for the winter have their blood tested at a convenient location and the results are faxed to us.

Another advantage of having the warfarin clinic is that our nurses teach new patients about the drug and its effects. Its potency is affected by other medications – including over-the-counter drugs, herbs and even vitamins – as well as what patients eat. Patients learn that they must contact the clinic any time they change medications.

We are very fortunate to have this clinic for our warfarin patients. It's the only one of its kind in Superior. Years ago, patients didn't have access to these helpful blood-thinning medications. These days, the drug and a few minutes with a nurse from time to time can help them stay healthy and give them a much better quality of life.

