Digoxin

Introduction

Digoxin is a medication that has been used for many years. It was first described by a doctor from Birmingham called William Withering in 1785 when he found that extracting the sap of the Foxglove could help patients suffering with ‘dropsy’ (what we would now call heart failure). As such it is often said to be the start of modern medicines.

Since this time opinion regarding the use of digoxin has varied and this has continued to the present day. If you look for information on digoxin in textbooks and on the internet you will find widely differing views and it is important to ensure your information is up to date.

Digoxin is a medication now used less commonly in the treatment of atrial fibrillation (where the upper chambers - atria - of the heart beat irregularly) and atrial flutter (where the upper chambers - atria - beat rapidly but regularly). In some people with heart failure (where the main pumping chamber - the left ventricle - loses its strength) it may still be used to increase the force of contraction to assist with improving a patient’s symptoms.

Dosing

Digoxin is prescribed as a once daily medication. However, in most people you will find that the doctor asks you to take it twice daily at first to ‘load’ the body to speed up its initial effects.

Side effects

Digoxin is a medication which 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; loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, rash, blurred vision, visual disturbances (yellow-green halos around people or objects, described by some people as auras), confusion, drowsiness, dizziness, nightmares and agitation.

If you are concerned that your digoxin tablets may now be causing problems such as this it is important to seek medical advice promptly.

Monitoring

Used as directed, digoxin is an effective treatment which is considered suitable for long term use. However, 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 the pulse and the blood pressure). Occasionally the 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.

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