DRUG INTERACTIONS: MECHANISMS & EXAMPLES

Prepared by **Dr. Sidhartha Mullapudi**, DrNB (Cardiology), MD (General Medicine)
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I INTRODUCTION AND CLASSIFICATION

- **Definition:** A drug-drug (or drug-food/herb) interaction occurs when the pharmacological disposition or clinical effect of one medication is quantitatively or qualitatively altered by the prior or concurrent administration of another agent.
- **Clinical Impact in Cardiology:** Because core cardiovascular medications—including **Vitamin K Antagonists (Warfarin)**, **Direct Oral Anticoagulants (DOACs)**, **Digoxin**, **Antiarrhythmic Drugs (AADs)**, and **Calcineurin Inhibitors** (in heart transplant recipients)—possess narrow therapeutic indices and steep dose-response curves, interactions are a leading preventable cause of fatal arrhythmia, major hemorrhage, thromboembolism, and rhabdomyolysis.
- **Mechanistic Classification:** Divided into **Pharmacokinetic (PK) Interactions** (altering drug **Absorption, Distribution, Metabolism, or Excretion [ADME]** and thereby changing plasma drug concentrations) and **Pharmacodynamic (PD) Interactions** (additive, synergistic, or antagonistic effects at the target receptor, ion channel, or physiological system without altering plasma drug levels).

II PHARMACOKINETIC (PK) INTERACTIONS: THE ADME PATHWAYS

A Absorption Interactions (Gastrointestinal Tract)

- **Intraluminal Chelation: Bile acid sequestrants** (**Cholestyramine, Colestipol, Colesevelam**) bind anionic and lipophilic cardiovascular drugs—specifically **Digoxin**, **Warfarin**, **Statins**, **Ezetimibe**, **Amiodarone**, and **Thiazide/Loop Diuretics**—in the intestinal lumen, reducing bioavailability; medications must be administered **1 hour before or 4 to 6 hours after** the resin.
- **Gastric pH and Gut Microbiome:** Proton pump inhibitors (PPIs) lower gastric acidity, reducing the absorption of weakly basic drugs (**Dabigatran** absorption decreases by 20 to 30 percent, though clinically non-significant), while broad-spectrum oral antibiotics (**Macrolides, Tetracyclines**) eradicate gut *Eggerthella lenta* (formerly *Eubacterium lentum*) (which normally inactivates digoxin) and vitamin K-producing flora, potentiating **Digoxin toxicity** and **Warfarin over-anticoagulation**.

B Hepatic Metabolism Interactions (The Cytochrome P450 System)

- **CYP3A4 Inhibition (Statin Myopathy & Rhabdomyolysis): Simvastatin** and **Lovastatin** (and to a lesser extent **Atorvastatin**) are extensively metabolized by hepatic and intestinal **CYP3A4** (whereas **Rosuvastatin, Pravastatin, Pitavastatin, and Fluvastatin** have minimal CYP3A4 metabolism). Potent CYP3A4 inhibitors—including **Macrolides (Clarithromycin, Erythromycin)**, **Azole Antifungals (Itraconazole, Ketoconazole, Posaconazole)**, **HIV/HCV Protease Inhibitors (Ritonavir)**, **Cyclosporine**, and moderate inhibitors like **Amiodarone, Verapamil, Diltiazem, Amlodipine, and Ranolazine**—markedly elevate statin plasma AUC, precipitating severe **statin-associated myopathy and fatal rhabdomyolysis**. (FDA mandate: do not exceed **Simvastatin 10 mg/day** with Verapamil/Diltiazem, or **20 mg/day** with Amiodarone, Amlodipine, or Ranolazine.)
- **CYP2C9 Inhibition (Warfarin Bleeding Risk):** The more potent **S-enantiomer of Warfarin** is metabolized by **CYP2C9** (while R-warfarin is metabolized by CYP1A2/CYP3A4). **Amiodarone**, **Fluconazole**, **Metronidazole**, **Trimethoprim-Sulfamethoxazole**, and **Fluvastatin** potently inhibit CYP2C9, causing rapid INR surges and major hemorrhage; **empirically reduce the Warfarin dose by 30 to 50 percent when starting Amiodarone**.
- **CYP2C19 Inhibition (Clopidogrel Prodrug Failure): Clopidogrel** is an inactive prodrug requiring two-step hepatic bioactivation predominantly via **CYP2C19**. **Omeprazole** and **Esomeprazole** competitively inhibit CYP2C19, attenuating platelet inhibition on ex vivo assays (though the randomized **COGENT Trial** showed reduced GI bleeding without a significant clinical spike in MACE; nevertheless, guidelines recommend preferring **Pantoprazole** or **Rabeprazole**, which have minimal CYP2C19 inhibition, when a PPI is co-prescribed with Clopidogrel).
- **Strong CYP3A4 / P-gp Induction (Therapeutic Failure): Rifampicin**, **Phenytoin**, **Carbamazepine**, **Phenobarbital**, and **St. John's Wort** strongly induce both **CYP3A4** and **P-glycoprotein**, accelerating the clearance of **all DOACs (Dabigatran, Rivaroxaban, Apixaban, Edoxaban)**, **Ticagrelor**, **Warfarin**, and **Calcium Channel Blockers**, precipitating ischemic stroke or stent thrombosis (**Class III — Contraindicated** with DOACs and Ticagrelor).

C Efflux Transporter Interactions (P-Glycoprotein [P-gp] & OATP1B1)

- **P-gp Inhibition and Digoxin Toxicity: Digoxin** is cleared unchanged by the kidneys via glomerular filtration and active tubular secretion mediated by the **P-glycoprotein (P-gp / ABCB1) efflux pump**. **Amiodarone, Dronedarone, Verapamil, Quinidine, Propafenone, Clarithromycin, Itraconazole, Cyclosporine, and Ranolazine** inhibit P-gp (reducing both renal and extrarenal clearance) and increase serum digoxin concentrations by **50 to 100 percent**, precipitating bidirectional VT or AV block. **Mandatory Rule:** Reduce the **Digoxin dose by 50 percent** (or discontinue) when initiating Amiodarone, Dronedarone, Verapamil, or Quinidine.
- **OATP1B1 Inhibition: Cyclosporine** and **Gemfibrozil** strongly inhibit the hepatic uptake transporter **OATP1B1** (and glucuronidation), multiplying levels of **all statins** (including Rosuvastatin and Pravastatin); **Gemfibrozil + Statin is strictly contraindicated** (use Fenofibrate if fibrate therapy is required).

III PHARMACODYNAMIC (PD) INTERACTIONS: RECEPTOR AND CHANNEL OVERLAP

- **Synergistic cGMP Vasodilation (Nitrates / Riociguat + PDE-5 Inhibitors — Class III):** Organic **Nitrates** (nitroglycerin, isosorbide dinitrate/mononitrate, nicorandil) increase nitric oxide-mediated **cyclic GMP (cGMP)** synthesis, while **Soluble Guanylate Cyclase (sGC) stimulators (Riociguat, Vericiguat)** directly stimulate cGMP synthesis, and **PDE-5 Inhibitors (Sildenafil, Tadalafil, Vardenafil)** block cGMP degradation. Co-administration causes an unopposed intracellular cGMP surge and **profound, refractory, potentially fatal systemic hypotension**. Nitrates are **strictly contraindicated within 24 hours of Sildenafil/Vardenafil and within 48 hours of Tadalafil** (and Riociguat is contraindicated with both nitrates and PDE-5 inhibitors).
- **Additive Sinoatrial and AV Nodal Suppression:** Combining **Beta-Blockers** with **Non-Dihydropyridine Calcium Channel Blockers (Verapamil or Diltiazem)**, **Digoxin**, **Ivabradine** (note: Verapamil/Diltiazem also inhibit CYP3A4 metabolism of Ivabradine and are **strictly contraindicated** with Ivabradine), or **Amiodarone** produces synergistic negative chronotropic, dromotropic, and inotropic effects, precipitating severe sinus bradycardia, **complete heart block**, or **cardiogenic shock**.

- **RAAS Blockade + NSAIDs ("Triple Whammy" Nephrotoxicity and Hyperkalemia): NSAIDs** and COX-2 inhibitors block renal vasodilatory prostaglandin synthesis, constricting the **afferent glomerular arteriole**, while **ACE Inhibitors / ARBs / ARNI** dilate the **efferent arteriole** and **Loop/Thiazide Diuretics** reduce intravascular volume—precipitating acute kidney injury, sodium retention, blunted diuretic response, and **acute decompensated heart failure**. Furthermore, combining **ACEi + ARB** (ONTARGET trial) or **ACEi/ARB/ARNI + MRA (Spironolactone/Eplerenone) + Potassium supplements/Trimethoprim** causes life-threatening **hyperkalemia** (**ACEi within 36 hours of Sacubitril/Valsartan is Class III contraindicated** due to synergistic bradykinin accumulation and **angioedema**).
- **Synergistic IKr (hERG) Blockade and Torsades de Pointes:** Combining Class IA (**Quinidine, Procainamide, Disopyramide**) or Class III (**Sotalol, Dofetilide, Ibutilide, Amiodarone**) antiarrhythmics with non-cardiac QT-prolonging drugs—**Macrolides (Erythromycin, Clarithromycin, Azithromycin)**, **Fluoroquinolones (Moxifloxacin, Levofloxacin)**, **Azole Antifungals (Fluconazole)**, **Antiemetics (Ondansetron, Domperidone)**, **Antipsychotics (Haloperidol)**, or **Methadone**—causes additive blockade of the rapid delayed rectifier potassium current (**IKr**), prolonging QTc (>500 ms) and triggering early afterdepolarizations and **Torsades de Pointes (TdP)**.

Interacting Drug Pair	Primary Mechanism (PK vs. PD)	Clinical Consequence & Mandatory Action
Nitrates / Riociguat + Sildenafil / Tadalafil	**PD:** Synergistic intracellular **cGMP** accumulation	**Fatal refractory hypotension**; wait >=24 h (Sildenafil) or >=48 h (Tadalafil) (**Class III**)
Sacubitril/Valsartan (ARNI) + ACE Inhibitor	**PD:** Dual inhibition of **bradykinin** degradation (neprilysin + ACE)	**Life-threatening angioedema**; mandatory **36-hour washout** of ACEi before ARNI (**Class III**)
Amiodarone / Verapamil + Digoxin	**PK:** Inhibition of renal/intestinal **P-gp efflux pump** (+ PD AV block)	**Doubles serum Digoxin level** -> bidirectional VT/AV block; **cut Digoxin dose by 50%**
Simvastatin / Lovastatin + Clarithromycin / Ritonavir / Gemfibrozil	**PK:** Potent **CYP3A4** or **OATP1B1** inhibition	**Massive statin surge -> Rhabdomyolysis**; contraindicated (hold statin or use Pravastatin/Rosuvastatin)
DOACs + Dronedarone / Rifampicin	**PK:** Dual **P-gp + CYP3A4** inhibition (Dronedarone) or induction (Rifampicin)	Major bleeding (Dronedarone + Dabigatran/Rivaroxaban) or stroke (Rifampicin + any DOAC) (**Class III**)
Sotalol / Amiodarone + Macrolides / Fluconazole	**PD (+ PK):** Additive **hERG (IKr)** K+ channel block	Marked **QTc prolongation -> Torsades de Pointes (TdP)**

IV CONTEMPORARY GUIDELINE FOCUS: DOACS AND RITONAVIR (EHRA 2021 / ESC 2024 AF GUIDELINES)

- **DOACs and Antiarrhythmic Drugs (EHRA Practical Guide):** All four DOACs (**Dabigatran, Rivaroxaban, Apixaban, Edoxaban**) are substrates of the **P-gp efflux transporter**, and **Rivaroxaban and Apixaban** also undergo hepatic **CYP3A4** metabolism (~18% and ~25%, respectively):
  - **Dronedarone (Strong P-gp + Moderate CYP3A4 Inhibitor): Contraindicated** with **Dabigatran** and **Rivaroxaban**; requires **50 percent dose reduction of Edoxaban** (to 30 mg OD) and caution with Apixaban.
  - **Verapamil:** Increases Dabigatran levels; reduce **Dabigatran to 110 mg BD** when co-administered with Verapamil.
  - **Amiodarone:** Mildly increases DOAC plasma levels (12 to 60 percent); no routine DOAC dose reduction is required unless concomitant renal/weight/age dose-reduction criteria are met.
- **Nirmatrelvir/Ritonavir (Paxlovid) Interactions: Ritonavir** is an irreversible, ultra-potent **CYP3A4 and P-gp inhibitor**. Co-administration is **strictly contraindicated** with **Amiodarone, Flecainide, Propafenone, Dronedarone, Quinidine, Ranolazine, Ivabradine, Eplerenone, Sildenafil (for PAH), Ticagrelor, Rivaroxaban, Dabigatran (in renal impairment), Simvastatin, and Lovastatin** (whereas **Prasugrel** or **Aspirin** is safer than Clopidogrel/Ticagrelor, and **Atorvastatin/Rosuvastatin** should be temporarily held during the 5-day course).

V PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN THE INDIAN CLINICAL CONTEXT

- **Rifampicin Anti-Tubercular Therapy (ATT) Clashes:** Because tuberculosis is endemic in India, cardiac patients frequently require **Rifampicin-based ATT**. Rifampicin is a potent pan-inducer of **CYP3A4, CYP2C9, CYP2C19, and P-gp**, rendering **all DOACs, Ticagrelor, Ivabradine, Ranolazine, and most Calcium Channel Blockers ineffective** and requiring 2- to 3-fold higher doses of **Warfarin** with meticulous weekly INR monitoring (and urgent Warfarin dose reduction when ATT is stopped to prevent fatal rebound hemorrhage).
- **Irrational Fixed-Dose Combinations (FDCs) and Polypharmacy:** Widespread prescription of multi-drug FDCs (such as **Statin + Fenofibrate** or **Aspirin + Clopidogrel + Atorvastatin**) and unmonitored over-the-counter **NSAID** or herbal/Ayurvedic consumption in patients with diabetic nephropathy frequently precipitates acute-on-chronic kidney injury, hyperkalemia, and upper GI bleeding.

KEY REFERENCES

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