

Diagnostic and Advisory Service for Neuromyelitis Optica

Patient Information Leaflet

This information leaflet is designed to answer common questions patients ask about azathioprine. Further information can be found in the information leaflet supplied by the manufacturer or from your pharmacist or doctor.

AZATHIOPRINE

What is Azathioprine?

Azathioprine (also known as Imuran®) is an immunosuppressant drug, it suppresses inflammation and ‘turns-off’ the activity of the immune system. Azathioprine is often referred to as a “steroid sparing agent” or immunomodulator”. It allows the dose of steroids to be kept to a minimum and eventually stop.

Azathioprine is also used in other groups of patients with inflammatory conditions such as those with organ transplants, rheumatoid arthritis and psoriasis.

How long does it take to work?

Azathioprine acts slowly and can take 8-12 weeks to take effect.

Azathioprine does not cure the condition; you may need to take it for several years to keep symptoms under control.

If your doctor finds that Azathioprine isn't working for you, they may suggest a different immunosuppressant medication. This will be discussed with you.

What dose do I take?

Azathioprine comes in tablet form and is available in two different strengths - 50mg and 25mg. The dose prescribed by your doctor should be taken once a day with, or soon after food (it can cause stomach irritation if taken on an empty stomach).

Before taking azathioprine, you will have blood checked for Thiopurine Methyl Transferase (TMPT) levels and if they are normal start azathioprine 25mg once per day, increase increments of 25mg every 3 days to 2.5-3mg/kg of body weight

What do I do if I miss a dose?

If you remember within 12 hours, take your dose as normal. If more than 12 hours has elapsed then forget that day's dose and take your next dose at the normal time. Do not double the dose. If you take too much azathioprine tell your doctor immediately.

What are the common side effects?

During early weeks of treatment azathioprine may cause nausea and loss of appetite, rash, flu-like illness with fever, and generalised aches and pains. You may notice some hair loss while taking azathioprine. However, hair often does grow again, even if you carry on taking it.

Occasionally azathioprine may inflame the liver or result in acute abdominal pain due to inflammation of the pancreas (a digestive gland in the abdomen).

There may occasionally be a sudden worsening of diarrhoea, which can be difficult to distinguish from the illness itself.

Most patients (70%) however, can take azathioprine without any of these side effects.

Do I need any special checks while on azathioprine?

Azathioprine has been reported to cause blood disorders leading to weakness or breathlessness, a susceptibility to infections, and a tendency to bruise easily.

Although these affects on the blood are fairly rare, it is important that you have regular blood tests to check for early signs of changes in the blood. We recommend

- a full blood count including platelets,
- urea and electrolytes,
- liver function tests

initially done every week for 6 weeks,

monthly for 6 months and then at 2-3 monthly intervals.

You should also have your blood checked if you experience side effects such as a sore throat. The blood tests can be done at the clinic or, with agreement of your GP, at your local surgery.

It would also be advisable to file a copy of the reports and bring them along to clinic appointments for review.

You should also show it to your dentist if you are having any dental treatment and to your pharmacist when collecting any prescriptions for you.

What do I do if I experience side effects?

If you experience any signs of illness or side effects such as unexplained bruising, bleeding, sore throat, fever or malaise, contact your nurse, doctor or pharmacist immediately.

If you are in close contact with anyone who has chicken pox or shingles inform your doctor as soon as possible.

Can I take other medicines along with azothiaprime?

Azathioprine can interact with other medicines, for example *allopurinol*, *trimethoprim* and *co-trimoxazole*. Always check with your doctor or pharmacist first.

Vaccinations

You should avoid having 'live' vaccines such as polio and rubella. Most travel vaccines and flu vaccines are safe as they are **not** live vaccinations. Discuss with your doctor or pharmacist first.

Alcohol

It is safe to drink alcohol in moderation whilst on azathioprine, but it may aggravate the nausea.

What happens if I need an operation?

Let the doctor or nurse know so they can advise you what to do about your Azathioprine therapy. Make sure you take the monitoring booklet with you to all appointments and pre-assessment clinics. If you do need an operation, in most cases you will be advised to continue taking the azathioprine.

Is azothiaprine OK in pregnancy and breastfeeding?

If you are planning to become pregnant whilst on azathioprine you should discuss with your doctor first. You should not breast feed if you are taking azathioprine.

Never give any medications prescribed for you to anyone else