

# Patient Information Leaflet

# Azathioprine

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## Aim of leaflet

This leaflet tells you about Azathioprine. It explains about the medication and what the possible risks are. It is not meant to replace informed discussion between you and your healthcare provider, but can act as a starting point for such discussions. If you have any further questions, please ask your doctor, pharmacist or nurse.



## What is Azathioprine?

Azathioprine is an immunosuppressant drug that is used to control your body's immune system. It is mainly used in conditions where your immune system is overactive and reacting against your own body e.g. autoimmune hepatitis (AIH), inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) or rheumatoid arthritis. It is also used in patients who have had an organ transplant.

Azathioprine is often referred to as a “steroid sparing agent” or “immunomodulator” as it is often used to replace or reduce steroids.

## How does it work?

Azathioprine reduces the activity of the immune system and suppresses inflammation. Its effect on the immune system is not immediate and it usually takes about 6-8 weeks.

## What dose do I take?

The dose depends on the indication and your body weight e.g. AIH 0.5 - 1mg/kg daily or IBD 1.5 - 2.5mg/kg daily. However, the dose will change depending on your clinical response and also blood levels that can be checked. Patients also differ to how they break down the medication and this level (thiopurine methyl transferase) is checked before initiating the medication. The dose may start off low for the first month to ensure that you do not suffer any side effects.



## **How do I take it?**

Azathioprine is available in two different strengths, 25mg and 50mg tablets. A liquid version is available (25mg/5ml) but is usually only used in special circumstances. The dose should be taken once a day with, or soon after food, as it can cause stomach irritation. Swallow the tablet(s) whole with a glass of water.

It is important that you remember to take your medication. However, if you were to forget a dose, take the tablets as soon as you remember unless it is nearly time for the next dose, when it is best to miss out the one you forgot.

## **How long will I be taking it?**

This will depend on the indication and whether you are tolerating it. Do not stop taking your medicine unless your doctor tells you to, even if you feel well.

## **What are the potential side effects?**

Approximately 70% of patients can take Azathioprine without any side effects.

During the early weeks of treatment azathioprine may cause a feeling of sickness, loss of appetite, rash, flu like illness with fever and generalised aches and pains. This often wears off after a few days. It can be reduced by splitting the dose over the day (e.g. take one tablet twice a day, rather than two



at once). If the sickness gets worse or if it is associated with headache or muscle aches, then stop the medication and try again with one tablet a day when symptoms have settled. If it reoccurs contact us.

Some patients may also notice hair loss, but often the hair does grow again, even if you carry on taking the medicine. However, you should avoid hair dyes or perms for the first few months as your hair will be weaker than normal.

Occasionally azathioprine can inflame the liver or result in acute abdominal pain due to inflammation of the pancreas. It can also occasionally cause diarrhoea.

As azathioprine suppresses your immune system, your body may not be as effective at fighting of infection. If you have signs of infection (sore throat or fever), experience jaundice (yellowing of the eyes and skin), or any unexplained bruising or bleeding, **please contact the SWLU or your GP IMMEDIATELY.**

For a full list of all possible side effects that may occur when taking Azathioprine, please read the leaflet supplied with the medication.

## **Is there a cancer risk with Azathioprine?**

Similar to other immunosuppressive medications, patients receiving Azathioprine may be more likely to develop different kinds of cancers, including skin cancers. It is therefore important to take precautions to limit your sun exposure.



## What blood tests will I need?

Blood tests are essential while taking azathioprine, to check for any unwanted effects on your liver and kidney function or blood cell production.

When first starting azathioprine you will require a blood test weekly for the first four weeks and then two weekly for the second month. If you are tolerating it well you will then have a blood test every 3 months.

## Does azathioprine affect fertility or pregnancy?

If you are planning a family whilst taking this medication you must tell your doctor or nurse. Whilst usually safe, it is a complex issue that must be discussed with a specialist.

## Taking azathioprine with other medications.

Like many medications, azathioprine can react with other drugs. It is therefore important that you inform your doctor, nurse, or pharmacist if you start taking other drugs, even those that you may buy over the counter.

Allopurinol, often used to treat gout, causes the effect of azathioprine to be **significantly** increased. You should never start allopurinol if you are on azathioprine, without the dose of azathioprine being reduced. Sometimes allopurinol is used in combination with azathioprine “to shunt” the azathioprine, and therefore should not be stopped without discussing this.



You should avoid having “live” vaccines e.g. measles, mumps, rubella (MMR combined vaccine) and yellow fever. Inactivated (“dead”) vaccines are acceptable, but you should discuss with your doctor or pharmacist first.

## **Can I drink alcohol with azathioprine?**

Yes, it is safe. However, if you have been told that you have a liver condition it would be strongly advisable to reduce your alcohol intake and avoid drinking regularly.

## **Further questions or concerns.**

If you have any other questions about your treatment, or problems with your medication, please contact our nurse led helpline 01752 431320.





**This leaflet is available in large print and other formats and languages.**

**Contact: Administrator**

**Tel: 01752 431320**

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