AZATHIOPRINE: Patient Information Leaflet

The information in this leaflet will help you remember what your doctor has told you about azathioprine. It tells you about how the medicine works, how you should take it and whether there are any side effects. It will also help you to decide whether you want to go ahead with this treatment. You should read this leaflet alongside the manufacturer’s Patient Information Leaflet. Please retain this Leaflet for future reference.

What is azathioprine?
Azathioprine is a well-established, effective treatment for several different conditions, including rheumatoid arthritis, connective tissue diseases (e.g. systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE), vasculitis), several types of skin problem (e.g. psoriasis, pemphigus, and dermatitis), inflammatory bowel disease, several different types of neurological disease, idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis, some blood disorders and as an immunosuppressant to help the body accept an organ transplant.

What does azathioprine do?
It reduces the strength of the immune system (the body’s own defence system). Doctors may prescribe it for patients on steroid treatment so that their steroid dose can be smaller. It may be 3 to 12 weeks before you notice any benefits, but it is working during this period. Azathioprine may need to be taken for several years.

Your dose
Azathioprine is usually taken as a tablet once or twice a day, initially at a low dose (e.g. 50mg each day), and your doctor may increase this as necessary. The dose you are given will depend on your body weight.

How to take azathioprine
The tablets should be swallowed with a glass of water, with or after food.

Take care
Handle the tablets as little as possible and wash your hands after handling them. Store them at room temperature and out of children’s reach. Wash your hands after handling the tablets.

Azathioprine is made in two different strengths, 25mg and 50mg. Always check you have been given the right strength by your doctor or pharmacist. Do not take the tablets if you think you have the wrong strength and check with your doctor or pharmacist as soon as possible.

Depending upon how well the tablets work for you, the dose and number of tablets that you need to take may change.

What if I forget to take a dose?
If you forget to take a dose, take it as soon as possible, unless it is almost time to take the next dose. Do not take a double dose. Then go on as before. If you miss several doses, tell your doctor.

If you are sick
If you are sick within a few hours of taking azathioprine do not take another dose or double up your next dose. If you are repeatedly sick contact your GP.

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Do I need any special checks while on azathioprine?
Azathioprine reduces the production of blood cells making you more vulnerable to infections and can sometimes affect the liver. Blood tests will show if you are developing any side effects. If you are being affected, your treatment will be changed or stopped immediately.

It is important that you do not miss your blood test. **You must not take azathioprine unless you are having regular blood tests every 2 to 12 weeks.** Your doctor may increase or decrease the number of tablets you take at each dose depending upon the results of your tests.

What are the possible side effects?
Azathioprine has a number of side effects. However everyone reacts differently to medicines and it is very unlikely that you will have all the listed effects. If you have any of these effects you do not need contact the doctor unless they persist for more than a few days or become unbearable. However there are some rare, but serious side effects that you would need to tell your doctor about immediately.

In some patients, azathioprine can cause a feeling of sickness, diarrhoea, loss of appetite, hair loss and skin rashes.

Taking azathioprine can affect the blood count (one of the effects is that fewer blood cells are made). Your regular blood count test will check how well your bone marrow is working. Possible indicators of bone marrow damage are anaemia, regularly catching infections, and bruising and bleeding easily.

Very occasionally, azathioprine causes liver disease. Your regular blood test will check how well your liver is working and detect any early signs of damage. Possible indicators of liver disease are yellowing of the skin or generalised itching.

The patient information leaflet in your tablet packet has a more detailed list of possible side effects.

**Things to tell your doctor immediately**
If you have any of the following, tell your doctor immediately:
- Infections including fever, chills or a sore throat
- Yellowing of the skin or generalised itching
- Bleeding gums, black tarry stools or unexpected bleeding or bruising
- Severe and continuing diarrhoea, vomiting or stomach pains

See your doctor if you develop any new symptoms after starting azathioprine.
Other advice

Taking other medicines
Always check with your doctor or pharmacist before taking any other medicine. This includes medicines you can buy at a garage, newsagent, supermarket or chemist. This equally applies to herbal and alternative remedies. These can react with azathioprine and affect your treatment.

Also, the symptoms you are trying to treat may be a sign of azathioprine not working safely for you. It is important for your doctor or pharmacist to know so they can help you. Keep a record of any symptoms and discuss them with your doctor.

Vaccinations
Your doctor or nurse should not offer you any immunisation injections that contain ‘live’ vaccines such as rubella (German measles) and yellow fever.

Pneumovax and yearly flu vaccines are safe and recommended.

Drinking alcohol
There is no particular reason for you to avoid alcohol while taking azathioprine.

Food
Food made from unpasteurised milk, such as soft cheese, uncooked meats and pate, may be a source of bacteria which could increase your risk of infection. Read food labels carefully, and avoid eating these types of food.

Does azathioprine affect fertility or pregnancy?
If you are planning a family or become pregnant while taking azathioprine, you must discuss this with your doctor as soon as possible.

If you wish to breastfeed while taking azathioprine, you must discuss this with your doctor.

How should I store azathioprine?
Azathioprine should be stored in a cool, dry place, away from direct sunlight.

Other information
If your treatment ends and you have some tablets left over, return them to your pharmacist. Do not flush them down the toilet or throw them away.
### Contact information

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<td>Leeds General Infirmary</td>
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### Websites

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<tr>
<th>NHS Direct</th>
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<td>Tel: 0845 4647</td>
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