Mercaptopurine: Information for Patients

Introduction
This leaflet contains information about mercaptopurine to treat Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD).

It tells you:
- how the medicine works
- how you should take it
- whether there are any side effects

Read this alongside the leaflet called *Unlicensed Medicines: Information for Patients* and any information provided by the manufacturer in the medicine package.

Why have I been given this leaflet?
The information in this leaflet will help you to remember what your doctor has told you about this medicine. It will also help you to decide whether you want to go ahead with this treatment.

For most medicines, information is provided by the manufacturer in the medicine package. However, this medicine does not have a licence for use for Inflammatory Bowel Disease in the UK. This means that the information provided by the manufacturer does not tell you everything you need to know. We have written this leaflet to give you some extra information.

So this medicine does not have a licence. What does this mean?
The leaflet called *Unlicensed Medicines: Information for Patients* tells you more about medicine licensing regulations. It also tells you why unlicensed medicines are sometimes prescribed for patients.

Why does mercaptopurine not have a licence for the management of IBD?
Sometimes a medicine has been licensed for a certain use and later experience or research shows that it works for a different condition. The manufacturer can choose whether they apply to the Government to have the more recent information added to the licence. This costs a lot of money and in some situations it is not economical for the manufacturer to obtain or extend a licence.

Mercaptopurine is a cytotoxic made by the manufacturer for treatment of leukaemia. It is also useful in the treatment of Inflammatory Bowel Disease in patients who cannot tolerate azathioprine, mainly due to nausea and vomiting.

Remember that your doctor will have thought carefully about which medicine is best for your condition.
**What is mercaptopurine and how does it work?**
Mercaptopurine works by suppressing the immune system which is thought to be overactive in IBD. It is very similar to azathioprine, which is normally used as a first line immunosuppressant. For every 10 patients that stopped azathioprine due to adverse effects, between 5 and 8 patients will be able to tolerate mercaptopurine.

**How should I take mercaptopurine?**
Mercaptopurine is given as tablets. The tablets should be swallowed with a glass of water, with or after food.

The dose is based on your weight, normally 1-1.5mg/kg. It may be 3 to 12 weeks before you notice any benefits, but it is working during this period. Mercaptopurine may need to be taken for several years.

Regular blood tests will be taken to check that that your bone marrow and liver is working properly and not being affected by this medicine. This will be every two weeks for two months, monthly for four months, then every three months once a stable dose is reached.

**It is important that you do not miss your blood test. You must not take mercaptopurine unless you are having regular blood tests as described above.**

Your doctor may increase or decrease the number of tablets you take at each dose depending upon the results of your tests.

**When should mercaptopurine not be used?**
Take with extra care if you have any liver problems or have you had any disease which may have affected your liver or your kidney.

The manufacturers leaflet will explain this in more detail. Please tell your doctor if you have any of the conditions listed.

**Are there any side effects?**
Most medicines cause side effects. The leaflet provided by the manufacturer for mercaptopurine contains a list of the effects reported for this medicine. 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.

Taking mercaptopurine 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, mercaptopurine 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.
If you get any of the following, see your doctor immediately:
  • allergic reaction: the signs may include skin rashes, high temperature, joint pain, swollen face
  • any signs of fever or infection (sore throat, sore mouth or urinary problems)
  • Bleeding gums, black tarry stools or unexpected bleeding or bruising
  • if you suddenly feel unwell (even with a normal temperature)
  • any yellowing of the whites of the eyes or skin or generalized itching
  • severe and continuing diarrhoea, vomiting or stomach pains.

Will mercaptopurine affect any other medicines?
If you take any of the following medicines, tell your doctor or pharmacist and they will advise you.

- Allopurinol
- Warfarin
- Aminosalicylates - this includes olsalazine, mesalazine, sulphasalazine
- Co-trimoxazole and trimethoprim
- Clozapine

Tell your doctor or pharmacist about all the other medicines you take. This includes any medicines you have had prescribed by another doctor as well as medicines bought from a pharmacy or supermarket and any herbal remedies.

Whenever you are prescribed a new medicine, or want to buy a medicine e.g. from a pharmacy or supermarket, it is important that you tell the doctor or pharmacist about all the medicines that you take, including mercaptopurine. You should also tell your dentist when you see him/her.

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.

Can I drink alcohol while I am taking mercaptopurine?
Yes, it safe to drink alcohol while you are taking mercaptopurine, however large quantities of alcohol should be avoided.

Does mercaptopurine affect fertility or pregnancy?
There is a shortage of information concerning use of mercaptopurine during pregnancy in IBD. There have been reports of premature birth, low birth weight and abnormalities, though the association with mercaptopurine is unclear. If you are planning a family or become pregnant while taking mercaptopurine, you must discuss this with your doctor as soon as possible.

Mercaptopurine should not normally be used during breastfeeding. If you wish to breastfeed while taking mercaptopurine, you must discuss this with your doctor.
Where should I store mercaptopurine at home?
Mercaptopurine should be stored in a cool, dry place, away from direct sunlight.
It is important that all medicines are stored out of sight and reach of children.

Where do I get my next supply?
This medicine is available from your local pharmacist, but it may take a few days to arrange a supply. Ask your GP to write a prescription for you when you have at least a weeks supply left and take the prescription to your local pharmacy (chemist) in good time.

How can I find out more?
Your agreement should be obtained before prescribing any medicine.
This leaflet has been written to provide general information about mercaptopurine. If you have any further questions or concerns, please speak your doctor or pharmacist.

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