

## Patient information

# **Azathioprine (Trade names Azathioprine, Imuran)**

St Pauls Eye Department - Royal Liverpool Hospital

## **What is azathioprine?**

Azathioprine belongs to the group of medicines known as immunosuppressive agents. They reduce the strength of your immune system and can be used to treat some diseases where your immune system is reacting against your own body (autoimmune diseases) and chronic inflammation, as in uveitis.

## **Why do I need to take azathioprine?**

If your immune system recognises a part of your own body as foreign and reacts against it, such as in uveitis, this causes inflammation. Azathioprine reduces this inflammation.

Your symptoms may not be adequately controlled on medications, you are already taking for uveitis, such as steroids (Prednisolone).

Immunosuppressant medications tend to target the immune system more precisely than steroids. Your doctor has therefore prescribed azathioprine to further reduce the inflammation in your eyes.

## **Are there any precautions before starting azathioprine?**

Before starting treatment your doctor will need to know your medical history and the medications that you are currently taking.

## **Allergies**

before you take azathioprine please let your doctor know if you think you have ever had a reaction to Azathioprine, or any of its ingredients used to make it.

## **Pregnancy**

Taking azathioprine during pregnancy is not recommended. You must inform your doctor if you are pregnant or planning to get pregnant.

## **Breastfeeding**

This is not recommended as azathioprine passes into breast milk and therefore can be passed to your baby.

## **You should have an annual flu vaccination**

## **Medications**

Sometimes taking certain medications together can cause interactions: azathioprine should be taken with caution if you are taking Allopurinol, Cortisosteroids, Captopril, Cimetidine, Cytotoxic Drugs, Cyclophosphomide, Indomethacin, Mesalazine, Mercaptopurine, Penicillamine or Warfarin.

## **Other medical problems**

Having other medical problems may prevent you from taking azathioprine, for example liver or kidney disease, pancreatitis, chicken pox, and gout or if you are receiving any vaccination.

If any of the above applies to you, you must discuss this with your doctor before taking azathioprine. Let your doctor know if you have never had or been vaccinated for Chicken Pox (Rubella)

## **How long will azathioprine take to work?**

Azathioprine does not work immediately, and its effects may not be obvious for about six to twelve weeks after you start to take it.

## **Will I experience any side effects?**

Not everyone will have problems with azathioprine, although in some patients it may cause some unwanted side effects. Some of these symptoms may improve following the reduction of the dosage of your azathioprine.

## **You must inform your doctor immediately if you experience any of the following:**

- Abdominal (stomach) pains and/or diarrhoea.
- Jaundice (white of eyes or skin turning yellow).
- Lower back or side pain.
- Signs of any infection.
- Pain when passing water.
- Unusually tired/lethargic/weak.
- Unusual bleeding or bruising.

If you need to take azathioprine over a long period of time you may be at a very small increased risk of developing certain types of cancer.

This list does not indicate all of the side effects that can occur. Please read the information leaflet that you get with your medication. You may experience symptoms that are usual for this medication. Always ask your doctor if you are unsure. We will perform blood tests regularly during your treatment.

## **Is there an alternative treatment available?**

Alternative immunosuppressive medications are available, with their own effects and side effects

## **What will happen if I don't have this treatment?**

Your condition may worsen with the possibility of losing some or all of your sight.

## **What if I miss a dose?**

If you forget to take a dose, take it as soon as you remember, unless it is almost time for your next dose then just continue as usual.

**Never double your next dose.**

## **What if I am sick, vomit or have diarrhoea?**

If you have already taken your tablets and have any vomiting or diarrhoea, your tablets may not have been absorbed into your body.

This will depend on the time you took your tablet to the time of vomiting or diarrhoea. If this happens, speak to your doctor immediately who will be able to advise you what to do.

## **Do I have to take precautions while travelling abroad while I am taking azathioprine?**

Yes, as with any patients taking medications that affect their immune system, we would advise you to take extra precautions, especially when eating and drinking abroad. For example, drink only from bottled water: avoid undercooked food/ raw meat etc.

**It is also important to see a doctor immediately if you feel unwell (fever, vomiting, diarrhoea).**

Tell your doctor if you need to have any vaccinations before travelling.

## **Remember**

- Always keep medicines away from children
- Store medicines in a locked cupboard.
- Return any unused tablets to your pharmacy
- Do not take any tablets that are out of date.

## **Feedback**

Your feedback is important to us and helps us influence care in the future.

Following your discharge from hospital or attendance at your outpatient appointment you will receive a text asking if you would recommend our service to others. Please take the time to text back, you will not be charged for the text and can opt out at any point. Your co-operation is greatly appreciated.

## **Further information**

### **St Paul's Eye Unit**

**Tel: 0151 706 2000 ask for Bleep 4724**

### **Uveitis Nurse**

**Text phone number: 18001 706 2000**

**Ask for Bleep 4724 Uveitis Nurse**

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All Trust approved information is available on request in alternative formats, including other languages, easy read, large print, audio, Braille, moon and electronically.

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