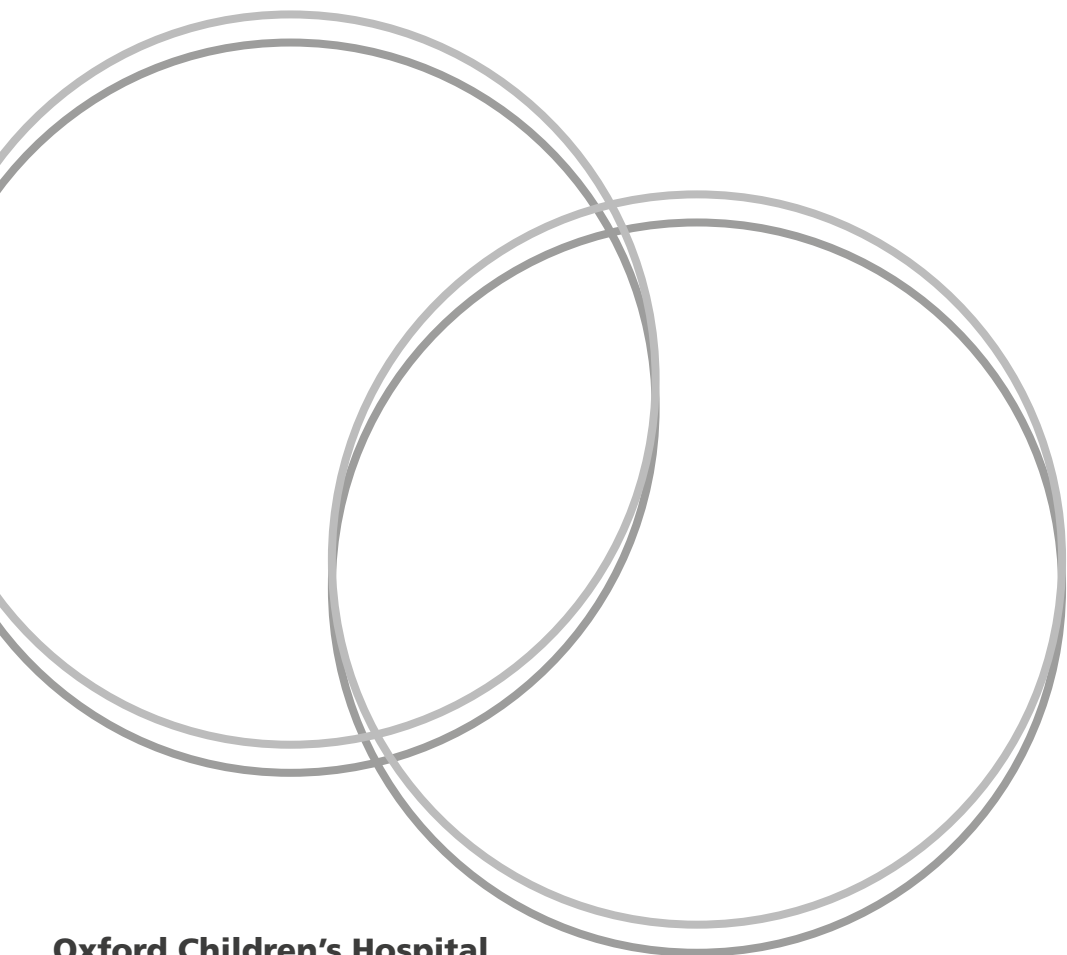




Oxford University Hospitals
NHS Foundation Trust

Medicines: Azathioprine

Information for parents and carers



Oxford Children's Hospital
Paediatric Gastroenterology Department

This information leaflet answers common questions parents and patients ask about their medicine. Further information can be found in the information leaflet supplied by the manufacturer, or ask your pharmacist or doctor.

Why have I been started on this medicine?

Azathioprine is often prescribed for patients with chronic active inflammatory bowel disease that requires continuous or repeated courses of corticosteroids. 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 including those with organ transplants, rheumatoid arthritis and psoriasis.

How does it work?

Azathioprine suppresses inflammation and 'turns-off' the activity of the immune system (hence the term "immunomodulator"). Evidence for its effectiveness is stronger in Crohn's disease but it is widely used in ulcerative colitis.

How long does it take to work?

Azathioprine acts slowly and can take several weeks to take effect.

It is important that you continue to give the medication during this time.

What dose do I take?

The dose of azathioprine is based on weight in children and is around 1 to 3 mg/kg, once daily. Occasionally, higher doses may be required.

How do I take it?

Azathioprine comes in tablet form and is available in two different strengths – 50mg and 25mg. The dose should be taken once a day with, or soon after food (it can cause stomach irritation if taken on an empty stomach). The tablets should be swallowed with squash, water or juice. Tablets can be crushed and mixed with mashed potato, yoghurt and honey. We can also order a special liquid form for very young children which is 50mg/5mls, but it may take a few days to come in and is only available from the hospital pharmacy.

How long will I be taking it?

If tolerated, you will probably be on azathioprine for a few years and should continue until discussed with your Consultant.

Do not stop taking your medicine unless your doctor tells you to, even if you feel well.

What are the common side effects?

During the 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 the medicine. 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 can take azathioprine without any of these side effects.

Rare side effects

Azathioprine may help to make some cancers less likely but it can also make it slightly more likely that you might develop:

- Lymphoma-a type of cancer affecting the lymph glands. Regular blood tests will help to pick up if you are developing any problems like this.
- Some types of skin cancer. To reduce the risk of this use a strong sun cream, factor 50 and above, and wear a hat and light clothing when out in direct sunlight as azathioprine can make your skin more sensitive to sunlight.

Do I need any special checks while on azathioprine?

Azathioprine has been reported to cause blood disorders, leading to weakness or breathlessness, an increased chance of infections (sore throat, fever, malaise), and a tendency to bleed/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 blood count, electrolytes, urea, creatinine and liver function tests are done every 2 weeks for 4 weeks, then monthly for 2 months, and then at 2 to 3 monthly intervals. You should also have your blood checked if you experience side effects such as a sore throat (see below). The blood tests can be done at the clinic or, with agreement of your GP, at your local surgery. If blood tests are done at your surgery, it is important that you ask your GP whether the results are satisfactory to continue on azathioprine. It would also be advisable to keep a copy of the reports and bring them along to your clinic appointments for review.

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 doctor or pharmacist immediately. If you are in close contact with anyone who has measles, chicken pox or shingles inform your doctor as soon as possible as they may require preventative treatment.

What happens if I forget to take a dose?

If you remember within 12 hours, take your dose as normal. If more than 12 hours has passed, then omit that 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.

Does azathioprine interfere with my other medicines?

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

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

You should avoid having 'live' vaccines such as polio and rubella. Some travel vaccines and flu vaccines are, however, acceptable. Discuss with your doctor or pharmacist first.

How to contact us

If you have any questions you may contact the Paediatric Gastroenterology Specialist Nurses:

Telephone: **01865 234 002** for queries.

Keep all medicines out of the reach of children. Never give any medication prescribed for you to anyone else. It may harm them even if their symptoms are the same as yours.

How to give feedback about your experience?

We would like to hear about your experience with our Childrens' Services. There are different ways to feedback to us:

Online: www.ouh.nhs.uk/patient-guide/feedback/

Email: childrens.patientexperience@ouh.nhs.uk

Or ask for a paper survey to fill in.

Further information

If you would like an interpreter, please speak to the department where you are being seen.

Please also tell them if you would like this information in another format, such as:

- Easy Read
- large print
- braille
- audio
- electronic
- another language.

We have tried to make the information in this leaflet meet your needs. If it does not meet your individual needs or situation, please speak to your healthcare team. They are happy to help.

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Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust
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