

Oxford Radcliffe Hospitals   
NHS Trust

Oxford Children's Hospital  
Paediatric Gastroenterology Department

# Azathioprine

Information for patients and parents

# Medicines Information

**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 (also known as Imuran®) 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.

## What dose do I take?

The dose of azathioprine is based on weight in children and is around 1-2 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). We can also order a special liquid form which is 25mg/5ml, but it may take a few days to come in.

## How long will I be taking it?

If tolerated, you will probably be on azathioprine for up to 5 years.

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 (70%) can take azathioprine without any of these side effects.

**See below for less common side-effects.**

## 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 week for 6 weeks, then monthly for 6 months, and then at 2-3 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 chicken pox or shingles inform your doctor as soon as possible.

## 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 forget that day's 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 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. Most travel vaccines and flu vaccines are, however, acceptable. Discuss with your doctor or pharmacist first.

## Is azathioprine OK in pregnancy and breastfeeding?

If you are planning to become pregnant while you are on azathioprine you should discuss this with your doctor first. You should not breastfeed if you are taking azathioprine.

## How to contact us

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

Tel: 01865 234002 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.**

If you need an interpreter or need a document in another language, large print, Braille or audio version, please call **01865 221473** or email **PALSJR@orh.nhs.uk**

Adapted for Paediatric use by Rhoda Welsh, Pharmacist  
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