

Oxford University Hospitals **NHS**

NHS Foundation Trust

Ocular Inflammation Service, Oxford Eye Hospital

Azathioprine (Imuran™)

Information for patients



Why am I taking azathioprine?

Your doctor has prescribed azathioprine for the treatment of your eye condition. It is an immunosuppressive drug which targets the immune system more precisely than steroids. Azathioprine reduces inflammation by dampening down the over-activity of the immune system cells. In order to have an effect it should be taken regularly.

The tablets

Azathioprine is available under the brand name Imuran, which comes as 25mg (orange) or 50mg (yellow) tablets. The dose you are prescribed will depend on your weight and the activity of your disease. You will be given instructions by your pharmacist on how many tablets you need to take and when to take your dose.

How long will it take to work?

Azathioprine does not help everyone who takes it. If it does help you, your condition may take several weeks to improve. Do not be discouraged if you do not see any improvement straight away.

Other medicines

There is a potential risk that azathioprine could be affected by or may have an effect on other medicines. Please make sure you tell us about any current medicines you are taking or any new medicines prescribed to you. This includes any over the counter remedies. You should also avoid alcohol except in small quantities (e.g. 1-2 units/small glasses of wine or half pints of beer per day).

Are there any side effects?

As with most medicines, you may experience side effects with azathioprine. These include indigestion, nausea and vomiting. Sometimes these side effects may be severe and might be accompanied by symptoms such as diarrhoea and/or flu-like symptoms, with fever and general aches and pains.

Other adverse reactions include skin rashes, hair loss, a high temperature, joint pains and breathing problems. If you develop any of these symptoms, please speak to your GP or one of the eye doctors or nurses at the Oxford Eye Hospital as soon as possible.

Very occasionally azathioprine can affect the liver or the number of white blood cells produced by the bone marrow. These important side effects can be detected by blood tests. It is **very important** that you have these tests, so that we can make sure that the drug suits you and isn't causing these problems.

If you develop a sore throat, cough, fever or other symptoms that last for longer than 3 days, report to your GP as soon as possible. These symptoms could be caused by a low count of white cells in your blood.

Blood tests for monitoring the treatment

You will need to have weekly blood tests for one month, then fortnightly (every two weeks) for two months, and then once or twice a month. It is very important that you have these tests. We need to regularly monitor your blood because azathioprine can suppress normal bone marrow function and white blood cell production, and may also cause problems with your liver function. If your liver is affected, it can take time for it to recover, even after you stop taking azathioprine. The blood tests will tell us if your liver has been affected and how well it is recovering.

Previous illness, pregnancy and breastfeeding

Before starting azathioprine you must tell your doctor if you have had hepatitis or a high alcohol intake in the past. This is because your liver may have already been damaged and taking azathioprine may increase the risk of you developing severe liver problems.

Azathioprine can increase the risk of miscarriage or birth defects. If you are female, you should use contraception whilst on azathioprine and for 3 months after stopping the drug. Please inform your doctor as soon as possible if you plan to become pregnant or think that you may be pregnant.

If you are male we advise that you should not father a child whilst on azathioprine or for 6 months after stopping the drug.

Avoiding infections

As azathioprine is an immunosuppressant; this means your body's resistance to infection can be reduced while you are taking azathioprine. You should avoid close contact with people who have infections. Azathioprine affects the way the body's immune system works, which can make you more likely to catch infections. Chicken pox or shingles can affect the eye, so if you develop either of these you should report to your doctor immediately. Also, if you develop a mild infection such as a cold or sore throat you should inform your doctor, as these may develop into a more serious illness. You should consult your doctor before having any vaccinations.

As your immune system is lowered, you also need to avoid eating bacteria. Do not eat soft cheese from unpasteurised milk. Reheat ready-meal foods or foods that have been frozen thoroughly and wash salads well. Avoid ready prepared supermarket salads as these have an increased risk of containing salmonella. If you feel unwell from eating any of these foods, please consult your GP immediately.

Additional information

If you have any further questions or need advice about your treatment please speak to your GP or your eye doctor at the Oxford Eye Hospital.

How to contact us

Oxford Eye Hospital Helpline

Tel: **01865 234 567**

(Monday to Friday, 8.00am to 6.00pm)

(Saturday, 9.00am to 4.00pm)

(Sunday and bank holidays, 10.00am to 2.00pm)

Eye Hospital Emergency (walk-in service)

(Monday to Friday, 9.00am to 5.00pm)

(Saturday, 8.00am to 4.00pm)

(Sunday and bank holidays, 10.00am to 2.00pm)

Outside of working hours, please contact your out of hours GP or dial 111.

If you have a specific requirement,
need an interpreter, a document in Easy Read,
another language, large print, Braille or
audio version, please call **01865 221 473**
or email **PALSJR@ouh.nhs.uk**

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