

# Azithromycin and Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD)

Information for patients





## What is azithromycin?

Azithromycin is a type of antibiotic called a 'macrolide antibiotic'. Antibiotics are used to treat infections caused by microorganisms, such as bacteria.

## Why have I been prescribed azithromycin?

You have been prescribed azithromycin as a preventative treatment, to try to improve control of your chest symptoms and exacerbations (lung attacks).

## How does it work?

Azithromycin kills certain bacteria and reduces inflammation in the lungs, which may help to reduce the number of lung attacks you have. Azithromycin may help reduce chest symptoms, such as coughing, sputum (phlegm) production and breathlessness.

## What do I need to know before I take azithromycin?

Do not take this medication if you are allergic to azithromycin, any of its ingredients or any other macrolide antibiotic, such as erythromycin or clarithromycin.

Your doctor will usually ask you to provide a sputum sample, to check for non-tuberculosis mycobacterium, which is a similar bacteria related to tuberculosis. It is important that we check for this prior to starting azithromycin, as if these bacteria are present azithromycin can't be used.

The doctors will also carry out a heart trace (ECG) before starting this treatment, to check the rhythm of your heart. You will also have blood tests to check your kidney and liver function, so that we can see if the azithromycin starts to affect these organs.

## What dose will I need to take?

The usual dose is one 250mg capsule, three times a week (usually Monday, Wednesday and Friday), but you may be prescribed a higher dose (one 500mg capsule, three times a week).

## Are there any side effects?

Azithromycin doesn't usually cause any side effects.

Less than 10 in 100 people experience tummy upset, diarrhoea, constipation, dizziness, headaches or a skin rash.

Less than 1 in 100 people report some hearing loss. The first symptom of this can be tinnitus (ringing in the ears). If you experience this symptom the azithromycin should be stopped immediately. Your hearing will then gradually return to normal.

Less than 1 in 10,000 people experience changes in their heart tracing or an effect on their liver. Your doctor is likely to repeat your heart tracing and blood tests once you have started azithromycin treatment, to check on this.

For further information on side effects please see the manufacturer's patient information leaflet, which will be in the box of medication.

## What if I forget to take my dose?

This should not cause any problems. Just take your next dose as scheduled.

## How long will I be on this medication?

You are likely to need to take azithromycin for 3–6 months (if it isn't causing any significant side effects). We will then review whether it is working. If it is reducing the number of lung attacks that you suffer from, and reducing your symptoms (coughing, sputum production and breathlessness), then you can continue taking it.

## Can azithromycin affect any of my other medications?

Please let your hospital doctor and GP know all the medications you are taking before you start azithromycin, including over the counter and herbal remedies. They will need to check for any potential interactions (reactions between the medications and azithromycin). Always speak to your doctor and/or pharmacist before starting any new medicine.

If you are taking any of the following medications you will need extra blood tests, to check that the other drugs are working and not causing side effects. The doses of these medicines may also need to be adjusted.

### **Theophylline and aminophylline**

Azithromycin can increase the levels of these medicines in your blood, so you may need extra monitoring with blood tests. Brand names of these medicines include Uniphyllin, Slo-Phyllin, Nuelin SA and Phyllocontin.

### **Warfarin**

Azithromycin can increase the blood levels of this medication and extra monitoring with blood tests may be required, especially when azithromycin is first started.

### **Digoxin**

Azithromycin can increase the blood levels of this medication and extra monitoring may be required, especially when azithromycin is first started.

### **Statins**

Azithromycin does not increase the blood level of statins in the blood, but you should look out for signs/symptoms of muscle aches, pains or weakness (rhabdomyolysis) and report any of these symptoms to your GP if they occur.

## What should I do if I suffer a flare-up of my COPD (exacerbation/lung attack)?

Although azithromycin is an antibiotic, you will still need to take other antibiotics for any chest infections or flare-ups of COPD. You should stop taking your azithromycin whilst on the other antibiotics. You can then start to take it again when they are finished.

## If I need surgery should I stop taking azithromycin?

You should not have to stop taking this medication before any surgery you might need. If you are unsure, check with your respiratory consultant or the surgical team.

## Can azithromycin affect fertility or pregnancy?

Azithromycin has no known effect on fertility. However, due to a lack of clinical data, if you become pregnant whilst you are taking azithromycin, stop taking it and tell your GP.

## Can I drink alcohol whilst taking azithromycin?

Yes, alcohol doesn't affect azithromycin. However, it may affect other antibiotics or medications you might be taking. Speak with your doctor or GP if you are unsure.

## Further information

If you have any other questions, please speak to the clinician who prescribed you the azithromycin.

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 **PALS@ouh.nhs.uk**

*Making a difference across our hospitals*

charity@ouh.nhs.uk | 01865 743 444 | hospitalcharity.co.uk

OXFORD HOSPITALS CHARITY (REGISTERED CHARITY NUMBER 1175809)



Authors: Sarah Poole, Lead Respiratory Pharmacist  
Mona Bafadhel, Respiratory Consultant

July 2018

Review: July 2021

Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust

Oxford OX3 9DU

[www.ouh.nhs.uk/information](http://www.ouh.nhs.uk/information)

