



Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte
Health Service Executive



Ospidéal Ollscoile Chorcaí
Cork University Hospital

Department of Rheumatology

Azathioprine (Imuran)

Patient Information Sheet

Why am I prescribed Azathioprine?

Azathioprine is used in the treatment of several different types of Rheumatic disease, including Rheumatoid arthritis and Systemic Lupus Erythematosus (SLE).

Azathioprine has effects on the immune system (the body's own defence system). One of its actions is to reduce the activity of the immune system, so it is always used with care. Doctors may prescribe it for people on steroid treatment so their steroid dose can be reduced.

When do I take Azathioprine?

Azathioprine is taken either once or twice a day with or after food. The tablets should be swallowed whole and should not be crushed or chewed.

How long will Azathioprine take to work?

Azathioprine does not work immediately. It may be 6-12 weeks before you notice any benefit. Do not stop taking Azathioprine without your doctor's approval.

What dose should I take?

Your doctor will advise you. Usually you will start on a low dose (for example, 50mg per day) your doctor may increase this if necessary. The dose you are given will depend on your body weight.

Azathioprine is not a painkiller so if you are on anti-inflammatory drugs or painkillers you may continue to take these with Azathioprine, unless your doctor advises otherwise.

What should I do if I miss a dose?

If it is almost time for your next dose, skip the dose you missed and take your next dose when you are meant to. Otherwise take it as soon as you remember, and then go back to taking your medicine as you would normally.

Do not take a double dose to make up for the dose that you missed.

What are the possible side effects?

Sometimes Azathioprine can cause nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, skin rashes, loss of appetite, fatigue or hair loss. Rarely does it cause mouth ulcers, stomach pains or blurred vision.

Taking Azathioprine can also affect the blood count (one of the effects is that fewer blood cells are made) and it can make you more likely to develop infections.

If you develop a **sore throat**, or **other infection**, **fever**, **unexplained bruising**, **bleeding or rash**, or if you become **breathless**, or **develop any other unexpected new symptoms** after starting Azathioprine, you should report to your doctor or rheumatology nurse specialist as soon as possible.

If you have not had **chickenpox** but come into contact with someone who has chickenpox or **shingles**, or if you develop chickenpox or shingles, you should go to your doctor immediately as you may need special treatment.

It is very important that you **avoid direct sunlight** and **do not use sun beds** while taking Azathioprine. Ultra violet light interacts with Azathioprine in skin cells and theoretically may cause skin cancer. There have also been rare reports of lymphomas in patients who have been treated with Azathioprine. It is recommended that women to have regular cervical smear tests while on treatment with Azathioprine.

Do I need any special checks while on Azathioprine?

Your doctor will arrange for you to have regular blood tests while taking this drug. These tests are very important and should not be missed. Blood tests should be done every 2 weekly for 6 weeks then every 3 months if not clinically indicated otherwise.

You must not take Azathioprine unless you are having regular checks.

Can I take other medicines along with Azathioprine?

Some drugs interact with Azathioprine so you should always let any doctor treating you know that you are on Azathioprine. You should not take 'over the counter' or herbal preparations without discussing this first with your doctor, nurse or pharmacist.

Can I have vaccinations while on Azathioprine?

It is recommended that you should not be immunised using any of the 'live' vaccines such as polio, rubella (German measles) or yellow fever. An 'inactivated' polio vaccine can be given instead of the 'live' polio vaccine and the inactivated version should be also given to people you are in close contact with such as members of your household. Flu vaccine, pneumovax and Covid-19 vaccinations are safe and recommended.

Does Azathioprine affect fertility or pregnancy?

If you are planning a family, become pregnant or if you intend to breastfeed while taking Azathioprine, you should discuss this with your doctor as soon as possible.

May I drink alcohol while taking Azathioprine?

If you drink alcohol only do so in moderation because Azathioprine can affect your liver.

Contact Details

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Always remember! Keep all medicines out of reach of children. Please note that this information leaflet does not list all the side effects of Azathioprine. Always read the drug information leaflet which comes with your medicine.