

# Azathioprine

## Information for patients

This leaflet answers some common questions patients ask about treatment with azathioprine. Further information and education will be provided by the clinician starting you on treatment. If you have any questions or concerns, please speak to a doctor, nurse or pharmacist caring for you. Please also read the patient information leaflet in the product.

### **1. What is azathioprine and what is it used for?**

Azathioprine is an immunosuppressant. It reduces the strength of your immune system to treat autoimmune conditions. These conditions can fluctuate between periods of remission (few or no symptoms) and flare-ups (worsening symptoms).

Azathioprine helps to prevent flare-ups and helps to control or reduce symptoms.

Further information can be found in the information leaflet supplied by the manufacturer or from your doctor, nurse, or pharmacist.

### **2. How to take azathioprine**

The dose of azathioprine is based on your body weight and the most effective dose to treat your condition will be calculated by your clinician. It works slowly and can take up to several weeks to take full effect. Your doctor will be monitoring your response to the medication and if there is no improvement after a few months they may consider stopping the medication.

The tablet(s) should be taken once a day with, or soon after food (it may cause irritation if taken on an empty stomach). Swallow the tablets whole. Do not break, chew or crush the tablets.

Do not take azathioprine if you:

- are allergic to azathioprine or 6-mercaptopurine or any of their non-active ingredients
- are pregnant or breastfeeding

### **3. What to do if you forget to take the medicine**

If it is within 12 hours of your normal dose you should take it as soon as you remember. If it is more than 12 hours since your dose was due do not take the dose and take your next dose at the normal time. Never take two doses at any one time. Contact your clinician if you take more than your normal dose of azathioprine.

## 4. Taking other medicines with azathioprine

Azathioprine can interact with other medicines such as **allopurinol** (used to treat gout), **trimethoprim** and **co-trimoxazole** (antibiotics), **phenytoin**, **sodium valproate**, **carbamazepine** (anti-epileptics). It is important to tell your clinician all the medicines you are taking, including over-the-counter medication or herbal remedies, before starting azathioprine therapy.

## 5. Possible side effects

Most people don't have side effects, and everyone reacts differently to medication. However, if you have any concerns about your symptoms contact your medical team or pharmacist.

Azathioprine may cause loss of appetite, rash, sickness, diarrhoea, abdominal (tummy) pain, reversible hair loss and sensitivity to sunlight. These side effects usually improve as you become used to the medication.

The effect of azathioprine on the blood is rare, but it weakens your immune system and therefore increases your risk of infection. If you develop any signs of illness or side effects such as infection, unexplained bruising, bleeding, sore throat or mouth ulcers, fever or malaise contact your doctor or pharmacist immediately. Additionally, if you have not had chickenpox and come in close contact with anyone who has chicken pox or shingles contact your doctor.

## 6. Monitoring requirements when taking azathioprine

Azathioprine can affect your blood cells, kidneys, and liver. Your doctor will carry out blood tests to ensure your new medication is not causing you any problems. Initially, in most cases, blood tests are carried out every 2 to 4 weeks then every 2 to 3 months after the first few months.

## 7. Vaccinations while taking azathioprine

The use of 'live' vaccines should be avoided while on azathioprine as there is an increased risk of infection.

## 8. How to get a further supply of azathioprine

Contact your GP if you need more medication.

## 9. How to store azathioprine tablets

Do not use after the expiry date stated on the label. Do not store above 25°C. Protect from light.

## Further information and support

If you need to speak to someone outside the scheduled clinic appointments you can contact the Hepatology Team by telephone or email:

### **During normal working hours (Monday to Friday, 9am to 5.30pm):**

Liver Pharmacy Team: [kch-tr.liverpharmacy@nhs.net](mailto:kch-tr.liverpharmacy@nhs.net)

**Monday to Friday after 5.30pm or weekends:**

Call 020 3299 9000 (switchboard) and ask for the on-call liver registrar.

**References:**

- Azathioprine Summary of Product Characteristics
- Azathioprine Patient Information Leaflet (PIL)

**PALS**

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) is a service that offers support, information and assistance to patients, relatives and visitors. They can also provide help and advice if you have a concern or complaint that staff have not been able to resolve for you. They can also pass on praise or thanks to our teams.

PALS at King's College Hospital, Denmark Hill, London SE5 9RS

Tel: 020 3299 3601

Email: [kch-tr.palsdh@nhs.net](mailto:kch-tr.palsdh@nhs.net)

PALS at Princess Royal University Hospital, Farnborough Common, Orpington, Kent BR6 8ND

Tel: 01689 863252

Email: [kch-tr.palspruh@nhs.net](mailto:kch-tr.palspruh@nhs.net)

**If you would like the information in this leaflet in a different language or format, please contact our Communications and Interpreting telephone line on 020 3299 4826 or email: [kch-tr.accessibility@nhs.net](mailto:kch-tr.accessibility@nhs.net)**