

Azathioprine

Information for
Parents, Carers & Young People



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Introduction

This leaflet contains information about the use of azathioprine in children with rheumatological conditions. It is most commonly used to treat systemic lupus erythematosus, systemic vasculitis or uveitis.

It tells you:

- how the medicine works
- how it should be given
- whether there are any side effects.

Please also read the general information leaflets available at <http://www.medicinesforchildren.org.uk> or available at the hospital pharmacy. This is in addition to any information provided by the manufacturer in the medicine package.

Why have I been given this leaflet?

The leaflet will help you to remember what your doctor has told you about this medicine. It will also help you to decide whether you want to go ahead with this treatment.

For most medicines, information is provided by the manufacturer in the medicine package. This medicine does not have a licence to treat systemic lupus erythematosus, systemic vasculitis or uveitis in children so the leaflet in the medicine package doesn't tell you everything you need to know. We have written this leaflet to give you some extra information.

What is azathioprine and how does it work?

In autoimmune conditions the immune system is overactive and attacks normal body tissue, such as the joints.

Azathioprine is an immunosuppressant, which means that it reduces the effectiveness of the immune system and slows down the disease.

Azathioprine has a steroid-sparing effect, meaning that the dose of corticosteroid that you/your child is taking may be reduced or even stopped. It is not a pain-killing medicine, so you/your child may need to continue with pain-killers including non-steroidal anti-inflammatories.

When should azathioprine not be taken?

There are people with certain medical conditions who should not take azathioprine, or who should take it with extra care. The manufacturers leaflet will explain this in more detail. Please tell your doctor if your child has any of the conditions listed.

Safe reliable contraception is very important when taking immunosuppressive medications. Some medications can cause abnormalities to an unborn child during pregnancy and can affect both the male sperm and the female eggs. Please discuss contraception or planning a pregnancy with your doctor or nurse. They can give you information on what risks the medication may cause to you and your baby.

If you think there is a possibility that you are pregnant or your partner may be pregnant please contact your nurse specialist or family doctor immediately.

How should I give azathioprine?

Azathioprine is available in tablet or liquid form. The dose depends on your/your child's weight so the doctor will tell you what dose to take/give and this may change over time.

Take/Give the azathioprine at the same time each day. It is best taken after food with half a glass of water. This helps to stop the feeling of sickness. Full instructions will be written on the Pharmacy label on the medicine bottle.

Please follow these instructions carefully.

You/Your child may need to take azathioprine for months or years. Keep giving the medicine until your child's doctor tells you to stop. Do not stop it yourself without talking to the doctor. Please contact the Leeds Paediatric Rheumatology team if you have any questions or concerns.

If you forget to take/give a dose, give it as soon as you remember. If it is nearly time for the next dose, miss out the one that you forgot.

If your child is sick within 15 minutes of giving a dose, repeat the dose.

Are there any side effects?

Everyone reacts differently to medicines. You/Your child may have some side effects or none at all. All medicines have the possibility of causing side effects. The leaflet provided by the manufacturer contains a comprehensive list of the side effects reported for this medicine. Side effects to azathioprine are rare however, you/your child may feel sick or actually vomit or have effects similar to flu.

If you have/your child has a sore throat, severe diarrhoea, fever or a skin rash occurs, please inform your doctor. If you/your child gets an infection or you notice their skin turning yellow or unexpected bruising or bleeding, please also contact your doctor urgently.

Azathioprine rarely can affect the blood cell numbers and very rarely the liver and kidneys. A blood test is needed before starting azathioprine and your child's blood must be checked regularly when taking the medication.

You/Your child must have a blood test (checking full blood count and liver function tests) every month until the dose is stable, then every 3 months after that while taking azathioprine.

Azathioprine can suppress the immune system and increase the risk of developing chickenpox or measles, if you/your child is not immune to these infections. Therefore if you or your child comes into contact with chickenpox or measles while on azathioprine, and you and your child are not immune contact your doctor.

Please arrange an influenza vaccine every winter, due to the immunosuppressive nature of the medicines. You may also need a pneumococcal vaccine.

As with all immunosuppressant medication we would recommend safe sun exposure, and in particular avoiding sun burn, due to an increased risk of long term skin damage.

Will azathioprine affect any other medicines?

Tell your/your child's doctor or pharmacist about all of the other medicines that you take/your child takes. This includes any medicines prescribed by another doctor as well as medicines bought from a pharmacy or supermarket and any herbal remedies.

In particular the antibiotics trimethoprim and co-trimoxazole can cause problems, as well as the blood pressure medicines in the group of medicines called ACE inhibitors.

If you are/your child is prescribed a new medicine, or you want to buy a medicine (for your child), it is important that you tell the doctor or pharmacist about all the medicines that you take/your child takes, including azathioprine. You should also tell your/your child's dentist next time you see him/her.

So this medicine does not have a licence. What does this mean?

The leaflet called unlicensed medicines available at <http://www.medicinesforchildren.org.uk/> tells you more about medicine licensing regulations. It also tells you why unlicensed medicines are sometimes used.

Why does azathioprine not have a licence for use in children?

Sometimes a medicine has been licensed for a certain use in adults and later use shows that it works for a similar illness in children. The manufacturer can choose whether they apply to the Government to have the more recent information added to the licence. This costs a lot of money and sometimes the manufacturer decides it is not worth their while.

Azathioprine is made by the manufacturer for rheumatoid arthritis in adults. However it is also widely used in children.

Remember that your doctor will have thought carefully about which medicine is best for your child's condition.

Where should I store azathioprine at home?

Store azathioprine in a cool, dry place, away from direct sunlight.

It is important that all medicines are stored out of reach of children.

Where do I get a further supply?

Further supplies are available from your GP. Ask your GP to write a prescription when you have at least a weeks supply left and take the prescription to your local pharmacy in good time.

How can I find out more?

This leaflet has been written to provide general information about the use of Azathioprine in children. If you have any more specific questions or concerns, please speak to one of the following:

Children's Rheumatology Nursing Team	0113 392 0683
Paediatric Rheumatology Secretary	0113 392 0666



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