

Azathioprine

Information for patients

What is Azathioprine?

Azathioprine (trade name: **Imuran**) is a drug used to suppress the immune system. The immune system is usually responsible for fighting infections, but sometimes it is necessary to suppress its action. In conditions such as uveitis or scleritis, the immune system mistakenly reacts against a part of the body causing inflammation. Azathioprine works by preventing immune cells from dividing and reproducing quickly, and so reduces the ability of these cells to cause inflammation. It is used in transplant patients to reduce the risk of rejection of the transplanted organ, in uveitis and other autoimmune disorders. It is taken orally as a tablet.

Why have I been started on this treatment?

Most patients who use Azathioprine to treat uveitis/scleritis are already using a steroid called Prednisolone. In the long term, in large doses, steroids have multiple side effects. Azathioprine is usually given to improve control of the uveitis/scleritis so that the dose of Prednisolone can be reduced.

What are the risks of the procedure / treatment?

1. The bone marrow and blood cells

Azathioprine works by preventing some white blood cells from causing inflammation. Sometimes, there is a more generalised reduction in the number of white blood cells, which is undesirable. Rarely, the red blood cells and the blood clotting are also affected. A blood count test will be performed weekly at first, then less often as it becomes clear that the drug is not causing problems.

Major problems with blood and bone marrow are unusual. If problems do occur, you may notice you develop an infection, or a sore throat may occur. Bruising of the skin, or bleeding from the gums or bowel is also possible. If any of these things do occur, you should contact your doctor immediately.

2. Stomach irritation

Some patients experience nausea when taking Azathioprine. This is minimised by taking the tablets after a meal or with plenty of water. Rarely, it may cause diarrhoea or stomach pains. This is unlikely, but if it does happen it should be reported to your doctor.

3. Infection and vaccination

Azathioprine, when used alone, is unlikely to lead to infections. However, it is most often used together with prednisolone. These two drugs, when used together, are associated with a greater risk of infection than for either used alone. It is **extremely important** that you tell any doctor planning to give you a vaccine, that you are taking azathioprine; some vaccines

cannot be used. However, it is recommended that you obtain annual influenza vaccination from your GP, and also obtain testing for immunity to pneumococcus, followed by immunisation if necessary.

4. Others

If you are planning to have a child, it is important that you should discuss this with your doctor before starting azathioprine. Most pregnancies pass uneventfully but should be monitored carefully. Azathioprine occasionally has effects on the liver or kidney. Regular blood tests will be used to monitor this. It can cause hair loss in some patients but this often resolves on its own.

Used as instructed by your doctor, and with proper safety monitoring, Azathioprine does not usually cause problems. However, it is a potent drug. **There is no drug useful for the treatment of uveitis which is entirely free of potential or actual side-effects. Make sure that any doctor who treats you for any reason, knows that you are taking azathioprine.**

Further Information and advice can be obtained from:

Maidstone Hospital Eye Clinic

09:00am – 17:00pm, Monday to Friday

Telephone: 01622 226202

Tunbridge Wells Hospital (Pembury) Eye Clinic

Answerphone 01892 633877

09:00am – 17:00pm, Monday to Thursday


Telephone: 01892 633880

09:00am – 13:00pm, Friday

Telephone: 01892 634450

For out of hours ring: 01622 729000, ask for the on-call eye doctor or go to your nearest Emergency Department

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www.nhs.uk

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Telephone: ☎ 01622 224960 or ☎ 01892 632953

Email: mtw-tr.palsoffice@nhs.net

or visit their office at either Maidstone or Tunbridge Wells Hospital between 9.00am and 5.00pm, Monday to Friday.

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