

## 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) and yellow fever.

An 'inactivated' polio vaccine can be given instead of the 'live' polio vaccine and the 'inactivated' version should also be given to people you are in close contact with, such as members of your household. If you are on azathioprine you should avoid contact with children who have been given the 'live' polio vaccine, for 4-6 weeks after vaccination.

Yearly flu vaccines and pneumovax (against pneumococcal infection) are safe and recommended. Tetanus vaccine is safe.

## Does azathioprine affect fertility or pregnancy?

You should not normally take azathioprine when pregnant. If you are planning a family or become pregnant while taking azathioprine, you should discuss this with your doctor as soon as possible.

You should not breastfeed if you are taking azathioprine.

## May I drink alcohol while taking azathioprine?

Yes, there is no particular reason for you to avoid alcohol while taking azathioprine.

## Where can I obtain further information?

If you would like any further information about azathioprine, or if you have any concerns about your treatment, you should discuss this with your doctor, nurse or pharmacist.

## Remember to keep all medications out of the reach of children

Acute Services Division



# Information for patients about Azathioprine



**Department of Neurology**  
Queen Elizabeth University Hospital  
1345 Govan Road  
Glasgow G51 4TF

 **0141 201 1100**

## **Azathioprine**

(alternative name Imuran)

### **Why am I being prescribed azathioprine?**

Azathioprine is used in the treatment of several different types of neurological disease, including myasthenia gravis, inflammatory neuropathies such as chronic inflammatory demyelinating neuropathy (CIDP), diseases that inflame the walls of blood vessels (vasculitis) and multiple sclerosis. 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.

### **What dose do I take?**

Your doctor will advise you. Often your doctor will start you on a low dose (for example, 25 mg per day) and will then increase this if no side effects occur. Sometimes your doctor may start you on a higher dose straight away. The dose you are given will depend on your body weight. A typical maintenance dose is 150-200mg per day.

### **How long will azathioprine take to work?**

Azathioprine does not work immediately. It may be 6 months before you notice any benefit.

### **What are the possible side-effects?**

- Sometimes people can develop an illness with flu-like symptoms (fever, sore muscles and joints) on starting azathioprine. If this occurs you should stop taking the medication and consult your doctor.
- Sometimes azathioprine can cause sickness, diarrhoea, skin rashes, loss of appetite or hair loss.
- Taking azathioprine can make you more likely to develop infections. If you develop a sore throat or other infection, or if you have a fever, you should tell your doctor.
- Taking azathioprine can also affect the blood count (one of the effects is that fewer blood cells are made) and the liver. If you develop unexplained bruising or bleeding, or become jaundiced, or if you develop any other new symptoms after starting azathioprine, you should tell your doctor.

- There is a slightly increased risk of certain types of cancer with azathioprine. Discuss this with your doctor.

As mentioned above, azathioprine can make you more prone to infections. 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.

### **Do I need any special checks while on azathioprine?**

Yes - because azathioprine can affect the blood count (one of the effects is that fewer blood cells are made) and can sometimes cause liver problems, your doctor will arrange for you to have regular blood checks while on azathioprine. This is very important. You may be asked to keep a record booklet with your blood test results. Bring this with you when you visit your general practitioner or the hospital.

**You must not take azathioprine unless you are having regular checks.**