

Azathioprine and 6-Mercaptopurine

(other names: Imuran, Amazon, Berkaprine)

This information sheet gives you information about your Azathioprine/6-Mercaptopurine tablets. It explains what the tablets do, how and when to take them and outlines side effects.

What the tablets look like:

- Azathioprine is available in two strengths: 25mg and 50mg.
- 6-Mercaptopurine is available in the strength of 50mg.
- The colour may vary depending on which brand your chemist is able to obtain.

Why you are taking Azathioprine/ 6-Mercaptopurine:

Azathioprine and 6-Mercaptopurine belongs to the group of medicines known as 'disease modifying' or 'second line' agents used to treat chronic hepatitis and inflammatory bowel disease. It suppresses the disease process by reducing the activity of the immune system.

Azathioprine and 6-Mercaptopurine needs to build up in the system so you will not have immediate benefit; this may take up to three months. You will need to continue to take your other medication as well.

How to take Azathioprine/ 6-Mercaptopurine:

The amount you have to take varies from person to person but it is usually from 50mg to 200mg daily for Azathioprine, and about 25mg to 50mg for 6-Mercaptopurine. It is very important to check the label on your tablet bottle or box so that you know which strength tablets you have been given as this will affect the number of tablets you will have to take.

It is best to take the tablets with or just after a meal in the evening; this will help counteract any nausea associated with these medications.

What to do if you miss a dose

Do not double up on your next dose, just continue taking the tablets as directed.

Can you take other medicines and alcohol with the new treatment?

Azathioprine and 6-Mercaptopurine are compatible with most other medicines but always tell your GP you are taking these drugs if he prescribes any other medicines. Allopurinol (Zyloric) for gout can be a particular problem, and advice should be taken before starting it.

Also if you buy medicines 'over the counter' at your community pharmacy; tell the pharmacist that you are taking Azathioprine / 6-Mercaptopurine.

Alcohol can be taken in moderation.

Side effects that may occur with Azathioprine / 6-Mercaptopurine

Tell the doctor or nurse promptly if you think you have noticed any side effects which can include:

- **Nausea, upset stomach:** This is less likely if you always take your tablets with a meal. The feeling of sickness usually goes away after a time as your body gets used to the treatment. If the sickness is severe, consult your doctor.
- **Mouth ulcers, sore throat or sore mouth.** Let the doctor know if the sore throat is a problem. If this is associated with fever, chills or sweating, **report it to your doctor immediately.**
- **Aches, pains, a headache** – like severe flu.
- **Rash, itching** anywhere on the body.
- Azathioprine sometimes causes **blood changes** but regular blood tests are performed to monitor this.
- Your body's **resistance to certain infections is likely to be reduced** while taking Azathioprine / 6-Mercaptopurine. For example, you should avoid close contact with people who have chickenpox.
- You should also **avoid having any vaccinations that use live viruses** without first discussing it with your doctor. This usually means yellow fever and polio. (**Please note, currently** (as of March 2021), **the Covid-19 vaccines** offered in the UK do not contain live viruses – the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine and Moderna vaccines **do not contain any live virus.** The Oxford Astra Zeneca vaccine uses a harmless, weakened adenovirus that has been genetically changed so that it is impossible for it to cause an illness.)
- **Pancreatitis** (inflammation of the pancreas), which can cause severe pain in your stomach. You should let us know immediately if this happens.
- An **increased risk of developing lymphoma** (a type of cancer affecting the lymph glands). The overall risk is still extremely small and is usually outweighed by the benefits of taking the medication.
- An **increased risk of certain types of skin cancer.** This can be reduced by using sunscreen and wearing suitable clothing if out in the sun.

Special arrangements:

Your doctor will arrange for you to have regular blood tests, initially weekly for four to six weeks and then every two/three months thereafter as agreed with your consultant. These will check your immune system and liver function to make sure they are not affected. It is essential that you have these blood tests taken; otherwise we may not be able to continue with your prescriptions.

Additional information:

Azathioprine and 6-Mercaptopurine are safe to take during pregnancy. A well-controlled disease provides a better outcome in pregnancy if controlled with these medications and stopping them provides an increased risk of flaring that can complicate a pregnancy.

If you have any further questions or need advice about your treatment, consult your GP or one of the gastroenterology staff when you come to the clinic. Otherwise, if you have any concerns please contact the specialist IBD nursing team.

Contacting us

Specialist Inflammatory Bowel Disease Nurses on:

Tel: 0118 322 8914

Email: rbb-tr.CAT4@nhs.net

To find out more about our Trust visit www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk

Please ask if you need this information in another language or format.

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Reviewed by R Merrick: April 2023

Next review due: April 2025