

What you need to know about **Azathioprine and Mercaptopurine** in the treatment of inflammatory bowel disease

What is my medicine?

Both azathioprine and mercaptopurine are drugs called immunosuppressants which work by dampening down the body's immune response. This helps reduce inflammation in the bowel. Both these drugs work in very similar ways. Some patients can experience side effects taking azathioprine and in these cases mercaptopurine can be used as an alternative. The choice of drug that you start on will be discussed with you at your out-patient appointment.

Both drugs are effective for treating Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis and are used particularly when people have had a number of 'flare-ups', especially if these have required steroids. These drugs will often allow us to withdraw steroids more successfully.

Please note when you read the label for mercaptopurine that this drug has also been used for treating some forms of cancer. This does not mean there is any relation to the treatment of your inflammatory disease or the likelihood of side effects.

How and when should I take the tablets?

The tablets should be taken after meals to avoid nausea, which can happen when treatment is started. They should be swallowed whole with a glass of water. If you forget to take a dose, take it as soon as you remember. If it is nearly time for your next dose, miss out the one you forgot. Do not double up.

Can I take other medicines?

It is important to tell your doctor and pharmacist about any other medicines you are taking. Azathioprine and mercaptopurine can be taken with most other medicines, except captopril, allopurinol, rifampicin, co-trimoxazole, trimethoprim, warfarin. The package insert for both drugs advises patients to avoid olsalazine, mesalazine and sulphasalazine (due to "test-tube" interactions) but most patients have not experienced any problems when taking both types of drugs together.

You should not have any live vaccines while taking Azathioprine or Mercaptopurine. If you need any vaccinations please check with the doctor that is treating you, or pharmacist first.

Will I need to have any tests?

You will need to have several blood tests before the treatment is started. One is to check the levels of a particular enzyme in your body that helps break the drug down. The dose of drug you are started on depends on the result of this test as well as your body weight. You will also need a blood test to check for previous exposure to chicken pox and other underlying viruses that can affect the treatment.

When you first start taking azathioprine or mercaptopurine you will need to have a blood test every week for the first month and then at least 3-monthly while you are taking the drug. These tests are carried out to make sure the medication is not causing any problems. We will telephone you or your GP if any changes in your treatment are needed.

What side effects are there?

All drugs can have side effects, although most patients do not notice any. Please tell your doctor or nurse straight away if you get any of the following:

- Sickness (nausea)
- Diarrhoea
- Skin rashes
- Flu-like symptoms
- Sore throat

People on azathioprine or mercaptopurine can sometimes have a fall in the number of their white blood cells. A drop in the white cell count can affect the body's ability to fight off infections. Having regular blood tests helps us to detect this and almost always, the changes in the blood respond to reducing the dose or stopping the drug. The doctor who is treating you or specialist nurse will advise you if this is necessary.

Very rarely some people may develop acute pancreatitis (infection of the pancreas causing severe abdominal pain).

It has been suggested that there is an increased risk of lymphoma (a malignant disease of the lymph glands) in patients taking azathioprine. However this is uncertain, and the very small risk involved has to be considered in the light of its benefits. Evidence from very large studies of patients with inflammatory bowel disease has shown no increased risk of cancer or lymphoma in patients in later life. There is also a potential risk of patients developing skin cancer whilst taking azathioprine. Therefore it is important that you remember to avoid using sun beds and to use appropriate precautions whilst in the sun.

Most side-effects cease on stopping or reducing treatment but please contact your doctor or specialist nurse if you develop any unusual symptoms or side effects described.

Can I drink alcohol?

Yes, it is safe to drink alcohol with this medicine.

Will it have an effect on fertility or pregnancy?

If you are thinking about starting a family or think you may be pregnant you should tell your doctor. Many patients have been taking azathioprine / mercaptopurine at the time of conception and treated with azathioprine during pregnancy. Although a small number of studies have found no increase in the abnormalities that can occur in pregnancy, there is a very slight chance that some pregnancy related complications may occur if fathers have been taking azathioprine at the time of conception. Currently we are advising fathers to stop these medications 3 months before conception but we will discuss this with you before you begin treatment.

In the case of women, it is usually safer and better to control the disease with medication, as it has been found that active disease may effect conception and pregnancy.

Breastfeeding is not advised whilst taking azathioprine or mercaptopurine.

How long will I need to take these tablets?

Normally you will need to take this medicine for about 2-5 years or longer. If your disease has been stable for a number of years your doctor may discuss the benefits and risks of discontinuing treatment with you. You should not stop taking azathioprine unless your doctor tells you to.

What if I have any other questions?

If you have any further questions about your treatment please contact the inflammatory bowel disease specialist nurses during office hours:

Sister Kay Greveson & Sister Elaine Cronin k.greveson@nhs.net / elaine.cronin@nhs.net

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