

# Azathioprine for eye (ocular) inflammation

Department of Ophthalmology

Information for Patients

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## What is azathioprine?

Azathioprine is a drug that can be helpful for people with eye inflammation. It was not originally designed to treat this, but, it is now given to patients who have this condition as it has proved to be useful in controlling the symptoms of their illness.

**Please note:** It is important that you read the manufacturer's leaflet as well as this one because it contains general information about the drug that you will need to know.

Please remember that it is not written for patients with eye (ocular) inflammation, so some of the information in it may not be relevant to you.

## Why have I been given azathioprine?

You have been given this drug to improve your eye condition. It is an immunosuppressant and helps to reduce inflammation. It tends to improve the symptoms over a longer period of time. If you are on painkillers or anti-inflammatory drugs, it is important that you should continue to take them unless your doctor tells you otherwise.

## What does azathioprine look like?

Azathioprine is a tablet that comes in two strengths of 25mg and 50mg.

**Health information and support is available at [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)  
or call 111 for non-emergency medical advice**

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To give feedback about this information sheet, contact [InformationForPatients@uhl-tr.nhs.uk](mailto:InformationForPatients@uhl-tr.nhs.uk)

## How will azathioprine help me?

Azathioprine works by suppressing inflammation, by acting on certain cells in the immune system and thus relieves your symptoms. However it may take up to 2 to 3 months before you notice an improvement in your condition.

## What dose of azathioprine should I take?

Azathioprine is usually taken 1 or 2 times a day depending on the dose, with or after food. You should avoid milk or dairy products at least 1 hour before and 2 hours after. Your doctor will advise you about the exact dose. How much you take will depend on your condition and weight. Your doctor may increase the dose later if needed.

## Are there any side effects?

All drugs can have side effects, although most people do not have any. These include:

- Being sick (vomiting)
- Diarrhoea
- Skin rashes
- Increased sensitivity to sunlight.
- This medication can lower the amount of blood cells that help your body fight infection. This is rare, and you will have regular blood tests to check for this.
- Inflammation of the liver can happen. This is also checked by a blood test.

Please tell your doctor or specialist nurse if you develop any of the following after starting azathioprine:

- A sore throat
- A fever
- Any signs of infection (redness/ swelling/ pain)
- Unexplained bruising or bleeding
- Any new symptoms or anything else that concerns you

## Can I take other drugs or medicines along with azathioprine?

Some drugs may interact with azathioprine. You should always tell your general practitioner (GP) or hospital doctor that you are taking this drug.

You should not take over-the-counter medicines including herbal and complementary medicines ( for example, St Johns Wort) without talking to your doctor or pharmacist first.

If you need to be immunised, you must tell your GP that you are on this medication. Some 'live' vaccines should not be given to patients on azathioprine.

Other immunisations that are not 'live' and can be given while on azathioprine but they may be less effective whilst you are on this drug.

**Please note:** It is very important for you to attend for regular blood tests. You must not take azathioprine unless you are having regular checks.

## **Can I start a family whilst on azathioprine?**

Whether you are a male or a female, if you want to start a family, you should discuss this with your doctor.

## **Can I drink alcohol while taking azathioprine?**

When taking this medicine, it is advised to drink alcohol in moderation and keep your intake of alcohol within the advised national guidelines.

## **Is there anything else I should avoid while taking azathioprine?**

This medicine can make your skin sensitive to sunlight. You should avoid being out in the sun for long periods at a time. You should wear protective clothing, sunglasses and sunscreen SPF 30 or above. This can increase your chance of skin cancer. Do not use sun beds whilst on this treatment.

Azathioprine may lower your ability to fight infection. There are some reports of bacteria (germs) found in food that may cause a problem to those who are less able to fight infections.

Cooked chilled foods should be reheated thoroughly, and salads washed well; avoid ready-prepared supermarket salads. Do not eat soft cheese made from unpasteurised milk.

You should avoid contact with anyone who has chickenpox or shingles especially if you have never had these infections. If you do develop either, seek medical advice immediately.

## What happens if I miss a dose?

Take the missed dose as soon as you remember. However if the next dose is less than 2 hours away, skip the missed dose and continue your regular dosing schedule. Do not take a double dose to make up for a missed dose.

## Important things to remember

- Keep all medicines out of children's reach.
- Take your medicine as prescribed. Do not stop or change the dose unless your doctor tells you to.
- Do not give your medicine to anyone else, even if they have the same condition as you.
- Make sure you attend your follow-up hospital appointments even when you feel well and your symptoms are under control.
- Please tell the hospital if you are not able to attend your clinic appointment so other arrangements can be made.
- Make sure you have enough tablets to last you until your next appointment.

## Who should I contact if I have any concerns?

If you have any concerns or questions about this treatment you can contact:

Uveitis Nurse Specialist: 07939 978 826

Corneal Nurses Specialist: 07970940125

Eye Casualty Department: 0116 258 6273

Ophthalmology Secretary (uveitis): 0116 258 6198

Ophthalmology Secretary ( cornea): 0116 258 5913

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