

AZATHIOPRINE

(Imuran, Thioprine, Azamun, Azapin)

What is Azathioprine?

Azathioprine is used to treat moderate to severe ulcerative colitis or Crohn's disease. It is often used in patients with inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) that has been difficult to control, for example with multiple courses of steroid therapy.

Azathioprine works to reduce inflammation in the body by targeting the immune system. It may take several months for azathioprine to start working effectively. Your doctor may want you to continue taking other medications during this time to help manage your disease.

How do I take azathioprine?

Azathioprine should be taken at the same time each day. Tablets should be taken with a glass of water 1 hour before or 2 hours after meals. If you experience nausea, azathioprine can be taken with meals or before bed.

What dose will I need?

Your gastroenterologist will prescribe an appropriate dose for your weight (usually 2mg per kg) and condition.

What if I forget to take a dose?

If you forget to take your azathioprine, take it as soon as you remember on the same day. If you only remember the following day, continue as normal and do not double up on the dose.

Can I take other medicines?

Azathioprine can be taken with other medicines but it is important you tell your doctor about any other medicines you are taking. This includes over-the-counter medicines, patches, eye drops, and herbal or alternative therapies.

If you are planning to have any vaccinations while taking azathioprine you should discuss this with your gastroenterologist, GP or IBD nurse. "Live" vaccines should be avoided while on azathioprine.

Routine monitoring and follow up

When starting on azathioprine you will need blood tests 1 – 2 weekly to check for immune suppression and liver inflammation, as well as frequent check-ups with your gastroenterologist. If your blood tests are stable after 2 – 3 months, you will have routine bloods tests 6 – 8 weekly and regular check-up appointments. If you become unwell or your blood tests are abnormal, you may require more frequent monitoring or have your dose of azathioprine adjusted.

It is very important that you have regular blood tests and check-ups with your doctor. It is unsafe to take azathioprine without having these done.

What are the side effects of azathioprine?

Up to 90% of people tolerate azathioprine without experiencing problems, while about 10% of people can experience side effects requiring them to stop the medication. When starting azathioprine, some people report nausea or flu-like symptoms such as shivering, mild aches and pain and headaches. These symptoms should settle after a few days but if the symptoms become severe you may need to stop taking azathioprine. Some people have found that if they have a viral infection, such as a cough or cold, it can take longer than usual to recover.

<i>Common Side Effects:</i>		
• Nausea	• Hair thinning	• Muscle and joint aches
• Vomiting	• Headache	• More prone to sunburn
<i>Uncommon but important side effects:</i>		
• Fever	• Abnormal liver function tests	• Pancreatitis
• Abdominal pain	• Lowered immune system	
<i>Rare side effects:</i>		
• Lymphoma (<i>risk increases from 2 in 10,000 when not on any medication to 4 in 10,000 risk when taking azathioprine</i>)		
• Skin cancers (BCC and SCC)		

Pregnancy and Azathioprine

As with any medication, women of childbearing age should take special care when taking azathioprine. If you are pregnant or are planning a pregnancy, please inform your doctor so they can discuss treatment options with you. Do not stop your medication until you have discussed your treatment options with your gastroenterologist.

What do I do if I feel unwell?

Azathioprine can lower your immune system making you more prone to infections. If you develop a chest infection, you should visit your GP who may prescribe a course of antibiotics to help you recover more quickly. It is important to report the following symptoms to your gastroenterologist, GP or IBD nurse. You may require a blood test or your dose of azathioprine adjusted:

- High temperature and chills
- Generally feeling unwell or vomiting
- Persistent sore throat
- Unexpected bruising or bleeding
- Skin rash
- Severe abdominal pain

Who can I contact for help?

You can contact the IBD Helpline on (03) 9288 3592 during business hours. Private patients can contact their gastroenterologist's private rooms directly.

For urgent matters outside of business hours, contact the St Vincent's Hospital Switchboard on (03) 9288 2211. Ask to speak to the gastroenterologist on call. In an emergency you should go to your local Emergency Department or call an ambulance (dial 000).