

MERCAPTOPURINE (6MP, Puri-Nethol)



What is Mercaptopurine?

Mercaptopurine (6MP) is used to treat moderate to severe ulcerative colitis and Crohn's disease. It is often used in patients when their inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) has been difficult to control, for example with multiple courses of steroid therapy. Some patients may have taken a similar drug called Azathioprine before, but may have stopped it due to mild side effects.

Mercaptopurine works to reduce inflammation in the body by targeting the immune system. 6MP is given at a lower dose than azathioprine. It may take up to 6 months for the 6MP to start working effectively. Your doctor may want you to continue taking other medicines during this time to help manage your disease.

How do I take Mercaptopurine?

Mercaptopurine tablets 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 food. If you experience nausea, 6MP can be taken at mealtimes or before bed.

What dose should I be taking?

Your gastroenterologist will prescribe an appropriate dose for your weight (usually 1.5mg per kg) and condition.

What if I forget to take a dose?

If you forget to take your 6MP, take it as soon as you remember on the same day. If you only remember the next day, continue as normal and do not double up on the dose.

Can I take other medicines?

Mercaptopurine can be taken with other medicines but 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 6MP you should discuss this with your gastroenterologist, GP or IBD nurse. "Live" vaccines should be avoided while on 6MP.

Routine monitoring and follow up

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

It is very important that you have regular blood tests and checkups with your doctor. It is unsafe to take mercaptopurine without having these done.

What are the side effects of Mercaptopurine?

Up to 90% of people tolerate 6MP without experiencing problems while about 10% of people can experience side effects requiring them to stop the medication. When starting 6MP, some people report nausea or flu-like symptoms such as shivering, mild aches and pain and headaches. These symptoms usually settle after a few days but if the symptoms become severe you may need to stop taking 6MP. 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 Mercaptopurine

As with all medications, women of childbearing age should take special care when taking 6MP. If you are pregnant or 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?

Mercaptopurine 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 to determine if you need to adjust your 6MP dose:

- High temperature and chills
- Persistent sore throat
- Generally feeling unwell or vomiting
- 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 with the gastroenterologist on call. In an emergency you should go to your local Emergency Department or call an ambulance (dial 000).

There are some important major side effects of 6MP. In rare cases, 6MP can affect the bone marrow, lowering the immune system and making you more prone to infection. Therefore it is important to monitor your white blood cell count closely while you are taking 6MP. Mercaptopurine can also cause inflammation in the liver or pancreas. Symptoms include abdominal pain and generally feeling unwell. With regular blood monitoring, it may be possible to detect and manage this by adjusting the dose of 6MP. Your doctor may also decide to stop the medication.

There is an increased risk of developing lymphoma in patients taking 6MP but the risk is very small and should be balanced against the health risks associated with having chronic active IBD.