

# Taking azathioprine for corneal eye 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 inflamed corneal conditions. It is an immunosuppressant. This works by reducing the strength of your body's immune system and reducing the inflammation.

Azathioprine is available as 25mg and 50mg tablets. Do not take it with trimethoprim or co-trimoxazole (antibiotics).

**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.

This treatment will manage your condition and help your eyes. Your GP will be able to prescribe these drugs for you.

## Why have I been given azathioprine?

You have been given this drug to improve your eye condition. It does not give pain relief and doesn't work fast, but it can improve 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.

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or call 111 for non-emergency medical advice**

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## How will azathioprine help me?

Azathioprine works by controlling inflammation, by acting on certain cells in the immune system.

## What dose of azathioprine should I take?

Azathioprine is usually taken once a day. You should take them with food or just after food. Do not break or crush them. Do not take any that are broken or split. Your doctor will tell you about the exact dose depending on your condition and weight.

We may start you on a low dose of azathioprine but this may be increased when we see you in clinic. Do not change the dose. If you stop taking the drug you will need to tell us by contacting the specialist nurse.

## Are there any side effects or risks?

All drugs have side effects, although most patients do not have any. Side effects include:

- feeling sick (nausea) (1 in 100)
- diarrhoea (1 in 100)
- stomach ache (1 in 100)
- can cause thinning of hair (1 in 1000)
- very small risk of developing a cancer of the lymphatic glands (lymphoma) (1 in 1000)
- This medication can lower the amount of blood cells that help your body fight infection. This means you may have an increased risk of getting, for example, colds, flu or infection. This is rare, and you will have regular blood tests to check for this.
- Inflammation of the liver can happen. This can cause yellowing of the whites of your eyes and your skin to become itchy. This is also checked by a blood test.

## Is there anything I should look out for?

If you have any of the following symptoms, call your doctor immediately:

- Unexplained bruising or bleeding anywhere on your body

- Blood in your vomit
- Blood in your poo or black, tarry poo (stool)
- Fever

Please tell your doctor or specialist nurse if you develop any new symptoms.

## Having regular blood tests

You must have regular blood tests to make sure the drugs are not affecting your body. If you do not have regular blood tests we will need to stop the azathioprine.

You can book a blood test with your GP, or you can come to the walk in test centre at the Leicester Royal Infirmary at any time to have this done.

A blood test should be done every week, for the first 6 weeks; then once a month while you are taking the drug.

The blood forms (forms needed for your blood test) will be given to you in clinic to start with. You will need to contact the specialist nurse to have more blood forms posted to you.

## Can I start a family whilst taking azathioprine?

Whether you are a man or a woman taking azathioprine, if you want to start a family, you should talk to your doctor as soon as possible as you may need to come off your medication.

If you decide to stop taking azathioprine so you can start a family, you will need to continue to have protected sex for 6 weeks after you come off your medication. Talk to your GP about effective forms of contraception.

If you are a woman on azathioprine and think you might be pregnant, you should see your GP for advice.

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

Some drugs may interact with azathioprine. You should always tell any doctor treating you that you are taking azathioprine. You should not take any over-the-counter preparations without talking to your doctor or pharmacist.

If you need a vaccine (immunisation), you must tell your GP that you are taking this

medication, as some 'live' vaccines should not be given to patients taking azathioprine.

Examples of live vaccines include:

- Oral polio
- MMR (measles, mumps and rubella)
- Yellow fever
- BCG (for tuberculosis)
- Oral typhoid

The following immunisations are not 'live' and can be given although they may be less effective whilst you are on this drug:

- Hepatitis (A and B)
- Flu (influenza)
- Absorbed diphtheria (low dose) and tetanus vaccine for adults and adolescents
- Pneumococcal vaccine
- Hib (Haemophilus Influenza B)
- Typhoid
- Meningococcal vaccines

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

Alcohol does not affect the way azathioprine works, but both azathioprine and alcohol can affect your liver. For this reason, it is important to stick to national guidelines of drinking no more than 14 units a week for men and women.

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

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

You should avoid contact with anyone who has chickenpox or shingles, especially if you haven't had these infections. If you develop either you should stop taking your medication and seek urgent medical advice from your eye doctor or nurse.

## What happens if I miss a dose?

Take the missed dose as soon as you remember. Do not double the dose. Do not take any more within 10 hours. Try to keep to regular times to minimise missing doses.

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

If you have any concerns or questions about your treatment, you should discuss this with your doctor or nurse. You can also contact us from the details below:

<b>Corneal Nurse Specialist:</b>	07970 940 125
<b>Eye Casualty Department:</b>	0116 258 6273
<b>Ophthalmology Secretary:</b>	0116 258 5918

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