AZATHIOPRINE FOR LUNG DISEASE - PATIENT INFORMATION SHEET

What is Azathioprine?
Azathioprine (also known as Imuran) is a drug that suppresses the body’s immune system. It has been in use for more than 40 years. It is usually taken in tablet form.

What is it used for?
Azathioprine is usually used together with steroids. Using Azathioprine can sometimes allow a lower dose of steroids to be taken. In respiratory disease, it is used in the treatment of conditions such as fibrosis, vasculitis and sarcoidosis. It is usually given over months to years and benefit may not be noted for several weeks.

Before taking Azathioprine.
Make sure your doctor knows if you:
• suffer from liver or kidney problems
• have ever had an allergic reaction to this medication
• have a current or have had a recent infection
• are attempting pregnancy, pregnant or breast-feeding
• have recently had a vaccination or about to have one (the ‘flu vaccine is safe to have with azathioprine)
• have never had chickenpox or measles

When and how do I take Azathioprine?
• Take the medication as prescribed by your doctor. This will usually be once or twice a day, with or after food.
• NEVER stop taking Azathioprine without first speaking to your doctor

What dose do I take?
Your doctor will advise you about the dose. You will usually start a low dose (50-100mg a day) and increase gradually up to 150-300mg a day (depending on the condition and body weight).

How should I store Azathioprine?
Store at room temperature in a dark place and protect from humidity (do not store in a bathroom or kitchen). Make sure that you do not risk running out of your tablets.

What are the possible side effects?
All drugs can cause side-effects. These become more likely at higher doses taken for longer periods and therefore your doctor will aim to keep the dose and duration to a minimum.

Common side effects of azathioprine include abdominal pains, nausea, and diarrhoea and poor appetite. These usually, but not always, wear off with time.

Less commonly, Azathioprine can cause suppression of the bone marrow (blood cells). You could become prone to infection (low white blood cells) or bruise/bleed easily (low platelet count). It can also cause liver damage. If you become unwell or develop a temperature while taking Azathioprine, you should report to your doctor immediately. If you have not had Chickenpox or
measles and become exposed to someone with either, you should also report to your doctor immediately.

If taken for a number of years, there is an increased risk of some types of cancer including skin cancer. You should see your doctor if you have any concerns about new skin problems.

**What should I monitor?**
You do not need to perform any regular monitoring unless suggested specifically by your doctor. However, your doctor will need to perform regular blood tests to check your blood count and liver tests. These will usually be weekly for the first month, fortnightly for the next month and monthly thereafter and falling to three-monthly once a stable dose has been reached.

**Does Azathioprine interfere with any other medications?**
You should always give a full list of your medications (including over-the-counter and herbal remedies) to your doctor. Azathioprine can be taken with most other medications. However, make certain your doctor/pharmacist know if you are taking Allopurinol (a drug used for gout). Never take any over-the-counter medicines without informing the pharmacist of your full list of medication.

You should avoid live vaccinations, such as polio and rubella (German measles). However, flu vaccines and pneumovax are safe and recommended.

**Can I drink alcohol?**
Yes, but alcohol intake should be in moderation.

**Can I take Azathioprine in pregnancy or when breast-feeding?**
Azathioprine should not normally be taken in pregnancy or when breast-feeding. If you are planning pregnancy or are breast-feeding, you should discuss this with your doctor.

**What if I take an overdose of Azathioprine?**
If you take an overdose of Azathioprine, contact your doctor. Always take the container with you, if possible, even if empty.

**What if I miss a dose?**
If it is nearly time for the next dose then leave it out and take the next dose at the normal time. NEVER take double the dose to make up for missed doses.

**REMEMBER**
- Never give your medication to others even if their condition and medication appears to be the same as yours.
- Keep all medicines out of reach of children.