

# Azathioprine

(Information from the DEPARTMENT OF RHEUMATOLOGY, IMMUNOLOGY AND ALLERGY,  
Christchurch Hospital, Christchurch, New Zealand)

## WHY AM I BEING PRESCRIBED AZATHIOPRINE?

Azathioprine is used in the treatment of several different types of rheumatic disease, including rheumatoid arthritis and systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE)- Azathioprine has effects on the immune system (the body's own defence system)- One of its actions is to reduce the activity of the immune system, so it is always used with care- Doctors often prescribe it for patients on steroid treatment (eg prednisone) so their steroid dose can be smaller-

## HOW DO I TAKE AZATHIOPRINE?

Azathioprine is taken either once or twice a day with or after food-

## WHAT DOSE DO I TAKE?

Your doctor will advise you- Usually you will start on a low dose (for example, 50 mg per day) and your doctor may increase this if necessary- The dose you are given will depend on your body weight- Azathioprine is not a pain-killer- So if you are on an anti-inflammatory drug or painkillers it is important to continue to take these as well as azathioprine, unless your doctor advises otherwise-

## HOW LONG WILL AZATHIOPRINE TAKE TO WORK?

Azathioprine does not work immediately - It may be 6 to 12 weeks before you notice any benefit-

## WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE SIDE EFFECTS?

All drugs can cause side effects, although most patients never have them- Sometimes azathioprine can cause sickness, diarrhoea or skin rashes- Taking azathioprine can make you more likely to develop infections- If you develop a sore throat or other infection, or if you have a fever, develop unexplained bruising or bleeding, or become jaundiced, or you develop any other new symptoms after starting azathioprine, you should tell your doctor.

Azathioprine can make you more prone to infections- If you have not had chicken-pox but come into contact with someone who has chicken-pox or shingles, you should report to your doctor immediately as you may need special treatment- If you develop chickenpox or shingles you should report to your doctor immediately-

## MONITORING TESTS

Because azathioprine can affect the blood count (one of the effects is that fewer blood cells are made) and can sometimes cause liver problems, your doctor will arrange for you to have regular blood checks while on azathioprine- This is very important- You may be asked to keep a record booklet with your blood test results- Bring this with you when you visit your general practitioner or the hospital-

## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

- Some drugs interact with azathioprine and you should always tell any doctor treating you that you are taking azathioprine- You should not take azathioprine at the same time as the anti-gout drug allopurinol (Zyloprim)- You should not take 'over the counter' preparations without discussing things first with your doctor or pharmacist- However, many drugs can be safely taken with azathioprine-

- Immunization injection You should avoid immunisation injections which involve any of the live vaccines such as polio and rubella- These are used in immunisation against polio infection and German measles-

- Pregnancy You should not take azathioprine when pregnant- If you are planning a family or become pregnant while taking azathioprine, you should discuss this with your doctor as soon as possible- You should not breast feed if you are taking azathioprine-

- ALCOHOL There is no particular reason for you to avoid alcohol while taking azathioprine but moderation is recommended as both alcohol and azathioprine can affect your liver-

## WHERE CAN I OBTAIN FURTHER INFORMATION?

If you would like any further information about azathioprine, or if you have any concerns about your treatment, you should discuss this with your doctor or pharmacist-

**REMEMBER TO KEEP ALL MEDICINES OUT OF REACH OF CHILDREN.**