

Azathioprine for Autoimmune Hepatitis

The leaflet aims to answer your questions about taking azathioprine to treat your autoimmune hepatitis.

If you have any questions or concerns, please speak to a healthcare professional caring for you.

What is azathioprine?

Azathioprine is used to treat a variety of medical conditions such as autoimmune hepatitis (known as AIH). AIH is an autoimmune disorder which means that the body's immune system (defence against illness) attacks your own body's cells causing inflammation in the liver. Azathioprine suppresses the body's immune system to treat the inflammation.

How do I take the medicine?

The dose depends on your weight but typically it will be started at a low dose of 50mg daily and changed as necessary. Typically doses vary between 25mg and 200mg daily. Azathioprine acts slowly so it may be up to three months before its benefits are seen. Azathioprine is routinely available as 25mg and 50mg tablets. You should swallow the tablets whole with a glass of water, they should not be crushed. Take it with or just after food to help reduce stomach upset. Normally it is taken in the morning but can be taken before bed if you experience nausea (feeling sick).

What should I do if I forget to take the medicine?

If you remember within 12 hours of your dose being due, take your dose as normal. If it is more than 12 hours, then miss the dose and take the next dose as planned. Do not double your dose if you have forgotten. It is important that you try not to forget any doses. Azathioprine works slowly and therefore if you regularly forget the medication this will result in you having a lower level in your blood, potentially making it less effective. If you have trouble remembering your medication, please speak to our pharmacy team for advice.

Are there any side effects?

Like all medicines, azathioprine can cause side effects but not everybody gets them. You must stop taking azathioprine and contact the Hepatology team or a doctor immediately if:

- You get any ulcers in the throat, fever, bruises or bleeding or if you think you have an infection.

- You experience any sudden wheeziness, difficulty in breathing, swelling of the eyelids, face or lips, rash or itching (especially affecting the whole body).

Common side effects:

- nausea, especially at the start of treatment. We may need to make changes to how and when you take the medication
- headache, ensure you are hydrated, symptoms usually resolve after a week or so
- diarrhoea
- dizziness
- hair loss (many cases resolve despite continued treatment).

Serious side effects:

These will require closer monitoring and in some cases, we may decide to stop the medication.

- Azathioprine works by suppressing your immune system thus you may be more likely to get an infection. Even if the infection is mild you should contact your doctor who may request a blood test.
- Azathioprine can suppress your bone marrow resulting in a reduction in the number of red cells, white cells and platelets produced. This will be monitored on your blood tests. It is important that you report any unexplained signs of bruising, bleeding or high fever.
- You may develop a rash. Please report any signs of a rash.
- Abnormal liver function tests can occur. These will be monitored on your blood tests but if you notice jaundice (yellowing of the eyes or skin) then please let us know immediately.
- Pancreatitis (inflammation of the pancreas) may occur. This normally causes severe upper abdominal (stomach) pain. If this occurs, please contact us immediately.
- Azathioprine increases the skin's sensitivity to the sun and so increases the risk of certain types of skin cancer. It is important to take precautions in the sun, such as wearing protective clothing and using a high sun protection factor (SPF 50) sun cream.
- Long term treatment with azathioprine can increase the risk of some cancers, including lymphomas. If you detect any new swellings, lumps or changes in your skin that last more than two weeks you should contact your doctor.

Contact a healthcare professional if you experience any serious side effects or if you have any concerns. Our contact details are at the end of this leaflet. If you need to speak to a healthcare professional outside of our regular working hours (Monday to Friday 9am to 4pm), please contact NHS 111, an out of hours GP or attend an emergency department (A&E) if you are very unwell.

Is there anything else I need to know?

When you first start azathioprine, you will need regular blood tests every few weeks.

- If your blood tests are stable after three months of treatment the frequency of these tests will reduce to every three months, which may be taken by your GP.
- When you first start the medication the Hepatology team will be monitoring you to assess for side effects or abnormalities on your blood tests. Please expect to have regular appointments or receive phone calls from them.
- We will also be monitoring the levels of azathioprine in your blood and may adjust your dose depending on the results.

How do I get a repeat prescription?

Azathioprine will be started by the Hepatology team but once you are on a stable dose a Shared Care Agreement will be sent to your GP for them to continue prescribing it and you will be able to get your medicines from your community pharmacy.

Useful sources of information

For more information about autoimmune hepatitis please refer to the British Liver Trust website <https://britishlivertrust.org.uk/>

Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns about azathioprine, please contact the Hepatology team via the secretaries on 020 8725 3032 (Monday to Friday, 9am to 4pm).

Out of these hours, please contact your GP or NHS 111 if you are concerned.

For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit www.stgeorges.nhs.uk

Additional services

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

PALS can offer you advice and information when you have comments or concerns about our services or care. You can contact the PALS team on the advisory telephone line Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday from 2pm to 5pm.

A Walk-in service is available:

Monday, Tuesday and Thursday between 10am and 4pm

Friday between 10am and 2pm.

The Walk-in and Advisory telephone services are closed on Wednesdays.

Please contact PALS in advance to check if there are any changes to opening times.

PALS is based within the hospital in the ground floor main corridor between Grosvenor and Lanesborough Wing.

Tel: 020 8725 2453 **Email:** pals@stgeorges.nhs.uk

NHS Choices

NHS Choices provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make decisions about your health.

Web: www.nhs.uk.

NHS 111

You can call 111 when you need medical help fast but it's not a 999 emergency. NHS 111 is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Calls are free from landlines and mobile phones.

Tel: 111

AccessAble

You can download accessibility guides for all our services by searching 'St George's Hospital' on the AccessAble website (www.accessable.co.uk). The guides are designed to ensure everyone – including those with accessibility needs – can access our hospital and community sites with confidence.



Reference: GST_AZA_01 **Published:** June 2024 **Review date:** June 2026