



Patient & Family Guide
2015

Azathioprine (Imuran®) Therapy



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Your healthcare provider feels that treatment with azathioprine (a-za-THY-o-preen) may help you manage your illness. This pamphlet will help you decide if this medication is right for you by describing what azathioprine is, how it works, and possible side effects.

This pamphlet is just a guide. If you have questions, please talk to your healthcare provider. We are here to help you.

What is azathioprine?

Azathioprine is sold in drug stores as Imuran®. It is an immunosuppressive drug. This means it suppresses the cells in your immune system that fight infection and inflammation.

Sometimes the immune system is over-active, which causes inflammation and damage to body tissues and organs.

Examples of diseases that cause an over-active immune response include rheumatoid arthritis, inflammatory bowel disease (Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis) and certain forms of liver disease. Azathioprine lessens the effect of the immune cells, which reduces inflammation.

While azathioprine has good effects, it may have bad side effects. Most of the side effects are simply annoying, but some can be serious.

How well does azathioprine work? Will it work for me?

40-60% of patients seem to respond well to azathioprine therapy. This approximately means that for every 2 or 3 patients who take azathioprine for their condition, one of them will see their symptoms get better.

Many patients take azathioprine and it helps control their disease using no other medications. If your healthcare provider recommends you start using azathioprine, it may or may not help your condition. Taking it as instructed increases the chances for good results.

What are the potential side effects of azathioprine therapy?

Certain side effects from azathioprine therapy are less serious than others, but may still be uncomfortable or upsetting. If you have certain side effects, your healthcare provider may lower the amount of medication you are taking, or tell you to stop taking the medication. Complications can happen that cause serious health risks.

If you have problems with these or any side effects, tell your healthcare provider right away.

Some possible side effects from azathioprine therapy include:

- **Upset stomach or feeling sick to your stomach** (1.4% of patients) and sometimes **diarrhea** may occur during the first few weeks of taking azathioprine. This will usually pass after 10-14 days if you continue to take the medication. Taking the medication with meals can reduce these symptoms.
- **Allergic reactions** (2.3%), skin rash, fever, muscle aches and joint pains
- **Skin infections**

More serious side effects from taking azathioprine may include:

- **Bone marrow suppression (1.4% of patients):** a serious and life-threatening side effect is reduced activity of the bone marrow. Healthcare providers can use a blood test to see if you are at risk before you start the medication by looking at levels of thiopurine methyltransferase (TPMT) in your blood. Low TPMT levels can mean you are at a higher risk of bone marrow suppression, and treatment will not be given.

- **Pancreatitis (1.4%): pancreatitis:** (inflammation of the pancreas) may develop within 1-2 months after starting this medication. It can cause abdominal pain and a rise in liver enzymes. If this happens, your healthcare provider will have you stop taking the medication.
- **Hepatitis (1%):** the medication may cause hepatitis (inflammation of the liver). Your healthcare provider watches for this by looking at your blood work. This is reversible if the medication is stopped.
- **During pregnancy:** birth defects have not been found in humans with the use of Imuran®. The biggest risk to a pregnancy is a flare-up in your disease. Most patients who are doing well on azathioprine and get pregnant would continue treatment throughout the pregnancy. If you get pregnant or are considering pregnancy, talk to your healthcare provider.
- **Cancer:** this medication is also known to slightly increase the risk of developing cancer with long-term treatment. Cancer (lymphoma and leukemia) is seen in patients who undergo kidney transplantation or who have rheumatoid arthritis and need azathioprine, usually in doses larger than is used for controlling Crohn's disease. The risk

of skin cancer may be slightly increased if you take azathioprine. Protecting your skin from the sun is very important. Tell your healthcare provider if you notice any abnormal moles or skin sores.

If you have any other side effect that you think may be caused by this medicine, talk to your healthcare provider.

What can I do to lower the chances of these side effects?

- Take the medication with meals.
- Get a blood test before you start taking azathioprine. This will check if you are at risk for serious bone marrow suppression if you take this medication.
- Talk to your healthcare provider before you get any live vaccinations. This does not include flu shots; all patients should get a flu shot every year.
- Report any infections to your healthcare provider.
- Have a regular check-up at least once a year.
- Talk with your healthcare provider before taking this medication if you are pregnant or

breastfeeding, or have liver or kidney disease, shingles, an infection or gout.

- Wear sunscreen or sunblock with a sun protection factor (SPF) of at least 15, proper clothing and hats and avoid direct sunlight, sunlamps and tanning beds.
- Talk to your healthcare provider if you notice any unusual moles or skin sores.

Concerns

You may be worried that this medication is too dangerous.

Azathioprine can cause problems, however, they are uncommon. There is more risk in not treating the disease than there is from taking the medication.

If you have any questions, please ask.

We are here to help you.

Notes:

Looking for more health information?

Contact your local public library for books, videos, magazines, and other resources.
For more information go to <http://library.novascotia.ca>

*Nova Scotia Health Authority promotes a smoke-free, vape-free, and scent-free environment.
Please do not use perfumed products. Thank you!*

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*Updated by: Jennifer Stewart, RNCCRP; Tim Mombourquette (GI Research Student)©
Designed by: Nova Scotia Health Authority, Central Zone Patient Education Team
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The information is not intended to be and does not constitute healthcare or medical advice.
If you have any questions, please ask your healthcare provider.

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The information in this pamphlet is to be updated every 3 years or as needed.