

## Ophthalmology

# Azathioprine for uveitis

Azathioprine is a medicine that can help prevent uveitis from causing damage to your eye. You can discuss the benefits and risks of taking azathioprine before you start treatment with your healthcare professional.

### About uveitis

The effects of uveitis can be sight-threatening due to flare-ups of inflammation. This can lead to permanent damage to your eye.

Uveitis is sometimes linked to autoimmune or inflammatory conditions. Sometimes no known cause is found.

### About azathioprine

Azathioprine is a type of medicine called an immunosuppressant. These medicines help to control your body's immune system.

In conditions like uveitis and autoimmune diseases like rheumatoid arthritis, where your body's immune system attacks your own cells. Your body's response is to fight back. This leads to inflammation.

Immunosuppressant drugs, such as azathioprine, help to treat autoimmune diseases. They which reduce the activity of your own body's immune system, which reduces the inflammation and effects of the disease.



## Patient Information

### **How and when to take azathioprine**

You'll usually take the tablets once or twice a day.

Swallow the tablets whole. You can take them with or without food.

Azathioprine may not work right away. It's important to continue taking azathioprine, even if it doesn't seem to work at first.

### **Side effects**

Most people do not have any side effects. For people who do have side effects, they are not usually serious.

If you have severe side effects or you're concerned about your symptoms, contact one of the healthcare professionals in charge of your care.

#### **Side effects include:**

- feeling sick
- vomiting
- diarrhoea
- minor hair loss and hair thinning
- rashes or blisters
- a sore throat
- raised temperature
- unexplained bruising or bleeding
- yellowing of the skin or eyes, known as jaundice.
- sensitivity to light

### **Chickenpox or shingles**

Contact your doctor now if you develop or come into contact with someone with chickenpox or shingles. These infections can be serious in some people who take azathioprine.

You might need treatment against chickenpox or shingles, and you might be told to stop taking azathioprine until you're better.

### **Tips to reduce your risk of infection and sunburn**

- Avoid close contact with people you know have an infection.
- Wash your hands regularly and carry antibacterial hand gel with you.
- Keep your mouth clean by brushing your teeth regularly.
- Stop smoking if you're a smoker.
- Make sure your food is stored and prepared properly.
- Keep your house clean and hygienic, especially the kitchen, bathrooms and toilets.
- Use sunscreen, wear a hat, and long sleeves to protect your skin from the sun

### **Blood tests**

You'll have regular blood tests as azathioprine can affect your liver and cause your body to make fewer blood cells.

At first, you'll need to have blood tests at least every 2 weeks. Once you're on a stable dose of azathioprine, you should only need tests every 2 to 3 months for as long as you take it.

### **Taking azathioprine with other medicines**

Tell your ophthalmology team which medicines you're taking. Check with your doctor or pharmacist before starting any new medicines.

Azathioprine can interact with medicines used to treat gout, such as allopurinol and febuxostat.

It's also known to interact with some medicines used to control high blood pressure such as warfarin.

You can carry on taking a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug (NSAID) or painkillers unless your doctor advises differently.

Do not take over-the-counter preparations or herbal remedies without discussing this with your doctor or pharmacist first. Some of them could react badly with azathioprine.

## Patient Information

### **Smoking**

If you smoke, it's worth cutting down or preferably giving up. Smoking increases your risk of complications with azathioprine and its treatments.

### **Alcohol**

Alcohol and azathioprine can both affect your liver. It's important you stick to the national guidelines.

The government guidelines say you should have no more than 14 units of alcohol a week, spread across 3 or more days.

You can find out more about units of alcohol at [www.drinkaware.co.uk](http://www.drinkaware.co.uk)

### **Having surgery**

If you're due to have surgery, you might need to stop taking azathioprine.

Speak to your doctor and surgeon about this first.

### **Vaccines**

If you need to have a vaccine while taking azathioprine, talk to your doctor or pharmacist first. Your doctor will have to advise you on what vaccines you can have.

It's a good idea to get:

- the pneumococcal vaccine to protect you against the most common cause of pneumonia,
- your yearly flu vaccines
- your COVID-19 vaccinations

### **Chickenpox**

If you have not had chickenpox, tell your GP. They may offer you a vaccine against it. The chickenpox vaccine may also be offered to people living with you before if they have not had the virus.

## Patient Information

Stay away from anyone who has had the live oral polio vaccine for six weeks.

### **Shingles vaccine**

If you're offered a shingles vaccine, speak to your healthcare professional. You may still be able to have it if you're on a low dose of azathioprine.

### **Pregnancy, breastfeeding and fertility**

If you're planning a family or becoming pregnant while taking azathioprine, discuss this with your doctor as soon as possible.

Current guidelines say that azathioprine can be taken if trying for a baby and when pregnant or breastfeeding.

Men are also fine to continue taking azathioprine when trying for a baby.

There is no evidence to suggest that taking azathioprine reduces fertility in either men or women.

## **Contact numbers**

### **University Hospital Coventry**

Retinal Specialist Nurse, Sister Mann (Jas):

**024 7696 4000** (switchboard) and ask them to bleep **2828**

E-mail: [jasbir.mann@uhcw.nhs.uk](mailto:jasbir.mann@uhcw.nhs.uk)

Mr Pagliarini and Miss Priti Kulkarni secretary: **024 7696 6497**

Secretary e-mail: [ketisa.mukwana@uhcw.nhs.uk](mailto:ketisa.mukwana@uhcw.nhs.uk)

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## Patient Information

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#### Document History

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# Emergency eye appointments: New booking system

If you have an urgent eye problem, you can now book an on-the-day telephone consultation via the Eye Emergency Referral Service (EERS).



Scan the QR code or visit [www.uhcw.nhs.uk](http://www.uhcw.nhs.uk) and search Eye Emergency Referral Service. You can book a telephone consultation via this link.

You will be spoken to by an expert clinician who will give you specialist advice on the next steps to take.

Please provide a phone number which you can be contacted on for the consultation. Please also be aware that you will be phoned as close to the allotted time as possible, although at busy times unfortunately there may be a delay.

**In the event that you feel you cannot wait to speak to someone, or do not have online access, then you may call 0247 696 4800.**

**This phone line is open 9am - 1pm; 1.30pm - 5pm (Monday - Friday, excluding bank holidays) and 9am - 12pm (Saturday).**

Please only attend the Eye Outpatient department if you have had a telephone consultation in advance and have been advised to attend.

In the event of an eye emergency out of hours, please the minor injuries unit at UHCW.