

Drugs for Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD) – Azathioprine and Mercaptopurine

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If your inflammatory bowel disease (ulcerative colitis or Crohn's disease) has not been well controlled, or is flaring up quite often, azathioprine or mercaptopurine can be added to your treatment.

Azathioprine and mercaptopurine are drugs that have been used for several decades in the treatment of inflammatory bowel disease, some types of arthritis and transplant medicine.

They work by reducing the activity of cells in the body's immune system (the system that helps fight infection). However, they can have side effects and because they reduce the body's defence system they need to be used with care.

How do I take azathioprine or mercaptopurine?

It is taken once daily.

What dose do I take?

The dose is calculated based on your weight. You usually start on a low dose and this is increased over a few weeks providing there are no side effects.

How long will it take to work?

It does not work immediately. It can take anything up to 12 weeks before we see any effects.

Do I need any special checks while on azathioprine or mercaptopurine?

Because these medications can affect your blood count and occasionally cause liver problems, it is vital that you have regular blood tests.

This is an important part of your care and your Specialist Nurse or Doctor will arrange with you when to have them performed.

What are the common side effects?

Like all medicines, azathioprine and mercaptopurine tablets can cause side effects, although not everybody gets them.

The most common side effects are nausea and vomiting and skin rashes. Pancreatitis (inflammation of the pancreas) is a rare complication.

You can be more susceptible to infections because of the way that azathioprine and mercaptopurine lower the immune system.

If you develop a severe sore throat or any other infection, or have a fever, easy bruising, jaundice, or develop any new symptoms you must see your GP and contact your IBD Specialist Nurse.

If come into contact with someone with chicken pox or shingles, or experience any sudden wheeziness, difficulty in breathing, swelling of the eyelids, face or lips, rash or itching (especially affecting the whole body).

You should see your GP immediately and contact your IBD specialist nurse as you may need to attend hospital for a blood test and to start some treatment.

Azathioprine and mercaptopurine increase the skin's sensitivity to sunlight and the risk of developing some forms of skin cancer. You should use sun protection and refrain from using sunlamps or sunbeds.

There have been isolated reports of lymphoma (a type of cancer of the white blood cells) developing in people with IBD who are taking, or have previously taken azathioprine and/or mercaptopurine.

However studies of large numbers of people with IBD have not demonstrated an increased risk of lymphoma in those who have been on azathioprine or mercaptopurine.

Do I continue my other treatments for inflammatory bowel disease?

Yes. However, some drugs may interact with azathioprine and mercaptopurine.

It is important that you inform anyone treating you of any other medications that you may be taking. A drug called allopurinol (for gout) is one to avoid.

Can I have immunisations while on azathioprine or mercaptopurine?

Flu vaccinations are safe, but you should avoid immunisations with live vaccines such as polio and rubella.

If you need any vaccinations, please speak to your nurse specialist.

Can I drink alcohol on azathioprine?

There is no reason for you to avoid alcohol (in moderation) while you are taking azathioprine or mercaptopurine.

Does azathioprine or mercaptopurine affect fertility and pregnancy?

At the doses used in inflammatory bowel disease, azathioprine and mercaptopurine do not affect fertility and appear to be safe during pregnancy.

Even so, it is important to talk to your specialist about the risks and benefits for you personally so that you can make an informed decision regarding your treatment, health and wellbeing.

Breastfeeding

Speak with your specialist if you intend to breastfeed whilst taking azathioprine or mercaptopurine.

Most common advice is to avoid breastfeeding as the drugs are excreted in small amounts in breast milk and the long term side effects to the newborn are unknown.

Where can I obtain further information about azathioprine and mercaptopurine?

If you have any questions, ask your doctor, the IBD specialist nurse or your pharmacist.

Further Information:

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