

Azathioprine

(Brand name: Imuran, Azamun, Azapin)

Information about your medicine, benefits, side effects and precautions.

What is it?

Azathioprine is a medicine used to treat certain childhood rheumatic conditions (diseases which may affect kidneys, joints, muscles, skin, gut or eyes). This can include lupus (also known as SLE), inflammatory bowel disease, uveitis and scleroderma. People who have had organ transplants also use it.

Azathioprine is a medicine that works by suppressing your immune system. It reduces the damage done by inflammation, rather than just reducing pain.

How will it help?

Azathioprine is a medicine that works slowly. You can expect your child to gradually start feeling better, but it might take one to three months.

How is Azathioprine given?

Azathioprine is given as a tablet.

When should it be given?

It is taken either once or twice a day.

What is the dose?

This depends on the weight of your child. It is usually started at a low dose, which is then increased. The final dose is adjusted according to response and side effects.

How long will it be used for?

People stay on azathioprine for long periods (several years) to help keep their disease under control.

Are there any side effects?

Azathioprine is usually very effective in improving your child's condition but, like all medicines, side effects can occur. Some are common, and some are rare. Most people don't have any problems when they take azathioprine.

Most common side effects	Treatment
Nausea (feeling sick) vomiting, loss of appetite & diarrhoea	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Dose alteration• Take dose with food• Anti-emetics (anti-sickness medication)
Skin rash / sun sensitivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use high factor sun screen and hats
Mouth ulcers Sore gums Sore throat	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Dose reduction; tell your doctor

Rare side effects	Treatment
Disturbance in the blood counts (change in blood tests results) Upset liver function Pancreatitis (felt as very bad stomach pain)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Usually returns to normal if azathioprine dose reduced or stopped

Things you need to know when your child's taking this medicine

What to do if your child is sick

Normal coughs and colds are okay. Don't give azathioprine if your child:

- Has a high fever
- Has had vomiting/ diarrhoea
- Has been in contact with chickenpox, shingles or herpes zoster
- Is sick and you're not sure why

If you're not sure, talk to your doctor, and get your child checked if necessary before giving the azathioprine.

Interactions

Azathioprine can interact with other medicines. Talk to your doctor before taking any prescription medicines, natural medicines and medicines that you can buy over the counter.

Immunisations

Most immunisations are safe to have (flu vaccine, cervical cancer vaccine, killed polio vaccine (IPV) etc) when taking this medicine.

Live virus vaccines (such as mumps, measles, rubella (MMR), polio (OPV)), varicella (chicken pox) and some travel vaccines should not be used.

Infections

Azathioprine can make chickenpox infections more serious. A blood test can be done to see if your child is already immune to the virus. If your child is in contact with chickenpox or shingles, call your doctor.

Alcohol

Azathioprine and alcohol are both broken down by the liver. Drinking alcohol while you are on azathioprine can put extra strain on the liver. It is not known how much is safe, so it is suggested that anyone on azathioprine should avoid drinking alcohol.

Sexual health

Having been on azathioprine in the past does not change your chances of having babies when you are older.

Myths and misconceptions

You may hear a lot of different information about azathioprine from friends, pharmacists or people that you know. If you are worried about anything, please talk to your child's doctor or nurse.

If your child is taking azathioprine they should see their paediatric rheumatologist regularly to make sure the treatment is working and to minimise any possible side effects.

CONTACT YOUR LOCAL ARTHRITIS OFFICE FOR MORE INFORMATION SHEETS ON ARTHRITIS.

This medicine should be kept in a safe place, as accidental overdose can be serious.

This sheet was produced in association with the Australian Paediatric Rheumatology Group