

AZATHIOPRINE

What is Azathioprine and how does it work?

Azathioprine (AZA) (otherwise known as Imuran) belongs to a group of medications called immunosuppressants. These are medications that suppresses (slow down) your immune system (the part of your body that usually fights off germs and sicknesses)

What is it used for?

AZA is used to treat conditions such as Systemic Lupus Erythematosus (Lupus or SLE) and myositis. These are *autoimmune diseases* which are sicknesses where your own immune system, which usually fights off germs, accidentally attacks your own body.

It is also used in some occasions in patients with organ transplants to prevent organ rejection.

How do you take Azathioprine?

AZA is taken with water on an empty stomach, preferably before meals. The dose is usually between 2 and 5 of the 50mg tablets.

What are the side effects?

All drugs may cause side effects. However, most people have no side effects or only minor side effects with AZA.

Call your doctor or go to your local clinic / day hospital if any of these side effects bother you or do not go away:

- AZA may also cause a decrease in blood cells in your bone marrow, which can lead to serious or life-threatening infections. When we start you on AZA, we ask you to come in for a blood check after 1 month. After this we check your bloods every 3 to 6 months.
- Upset stomach: no appetite, nausea, vomiting or diarrhoea
- Easy bruising / bleeding: this could be caused by a low platelet count. Your doctor should monitor your blood counts every few months.
- Sick more often: this could be caused by a low white blood cell count. Your doctor should also monitor your white blood counts every few months. Make sure you get a **flu vaccine** every year and a **pneumonia vaccine** every 5 years.
- Allergic reaction
- Occasionally AZA affects the liver. For this reason, we monitor liver function
- If used in high doses for a long time, there is a very small risk of developing certain cancers such as lymphoma, leukemia, and skin cancer.

Can I take AZA with other medications?

Talk to your doctor before starting any new medications. Medicines such as Allopurinol (used to treat gout) may worsen the side effects of AZA.

Contact us:

- Talk to your rheumatologist and rheumatology nurse at your next appointment or phone during clinic times: (021) 404 5394 (Monday or Friday) or (021) 404 5313 (Thursday)
- The SA arthritis foundation (www.arthritis.org.za, 021 425 2344) is the charity leading the fight against arthritis, and offers online or telephone advice.