

Patient information

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

Digestive Diseases Care Group

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 (MP) can be added to your treatment.

What are azathioprine and MP?

Azathioprine and MP are types of medicines called immunosuppressants and work by reducing the activity of cells in your body's immune system (the system which helps fight infection).

Azathioprine has been used for several decades in the treatment of inflammatory bowel disease, some types of arthritis and transplant medicine. MP is closely related to azathioprine and has similar actions. Because they reduce the body's defence system they need to be used with care.

How often do I take azathioprine or MP?

These can be taken once or twice a day.

What dose do I take?

This will be decided with your hospital doctor and the dose is usually based on your body weight to begin with. The starting dose is usually low and is increased over a few weeks. The dose of MP is approximately half that of azathioprine.

How long will it take to work?

Azathioprine and MP do not work immediately. It may take more than twelve weeks before you experience the full effect. If you respond to treatment and your blood tests remain satisfactory, you will usually remain on it for many months, and perhaps several years.

What are the benefits of taking azathioprine and MP?

Azathioprine or MP are effective in controlling inflammatory bowel disease and preventing you from having recurrent flares of symptoms.

What are the common side effects?

The most common side effects are nausea and vomiting which may be improved by taking the medication morning and evening instead of all at once. Your hospital doctor or IBD nurse will advise you.

Some people experience a flu-like illness with fever and general aches and pains.

Azathioprine and MP increase the skin's sensitivity to sunlight and the risk of developing some forms of skin cancer. You should avoid sunlamps or sunbeds.

Occasionally, the drugs may inflame the liver or cause abdominal pain due to inflammation of the pancreas (a digestive gland in the abdomen). These reactions disappear when the drug is stopped.

You can be more prone to infections because of the way that azathioprine and MP work. 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 family doctor (GP) and contact your IBD Specialist Nurse.

If you come into contact with someone with chicken pox or shingles, you should see your family doctor (GP) immediately and contact your IBD specialist nurse as you may need to attend hospital for a blood test and to start treatment.

There is a slightly increased risk of developing lymphoma (a type of cancer affecting the lymph glands), but for most people taking these drugs the risk is very small and the potential benefits outweigh the risk.

Are there alternative treatments available?

If you have side effects with azathioprine or MP, or your disease is not well-controlled with these drugs, you may be offered treatment with another immunosuppressant called methotrexate.

What will happen if I decide not to have treatment with azathioprine or MP?

Your symptoms will continue or worsen.

Do I continue my other treatments for inflammatory bowel disease?

Yes.

Do I need any special checks while on azathioprine and MP?

Because azathioprine and MP can affect your blood count and occasionally cause liver problems, your doctor will arrange regular blood tests to check this. **It is important that these blood counts are done regularly.**

Before starting treatment, we will check an enzyme called TPMT (Thiopurine Methyltransferase). This helps to predict who may get side effects. However, it does not identify all who may be affected and it is important that you have regular blood tests.

Can I take other medication along with azathioprine and MP?

Some drugs can interact with azathioprine and MP and it is important to tell any doctor treating you that you are taking them. The most important one is a treatment for gout called allopurinol, but other medicines that can interact include Warfarin and the antibiotics Co-trimoxazole (Septrin) and Trimethoprim.

Can I have immunisation while on azathioprine or MP?

Flu vaccinations are safe on azathioprine and MP. You should have annual flu vaccinations while on these drugs. You may also be offered other vaccinations before starting treatment.

You should avoid immunisations with 'live' vaccines such as polio, BCG (Tuberculosis), MMR (measles, mumps and rubella). An 'inactive' polio vaccine can be given instead of a 'live' one. Close relatives may have 'live' vaccines without any risk to you.

Can I drink alcohol on azathioprine or MP?

There is no reason for you to avoid alcohol while you are taking azathioprine.

Does azathioprine or MP affect fertility and pregnancy?

At the doses used in inflammatory bowel disease, azathioprine and MP do not affect fertility and appear to be safe during pregnancy. Only very tiny amounts of azathioprine are found in breast milk and no evidence of harm to children breastfed by mothers on azathioprine has been found.

If you are planning to get pregnant, or become pregnant, you should discuss your treatment with an IBD doctor. You can be referred to our specialist clinic at the Liverpool Women's Hospital in order to discuss things in more detail.

In this clinic you will be seen by an expert in inflammatory bowel disease and an obstetrician (a doctor who specialises in the care of pregnant women).

We will be able to discuss your treatment with you on an individual basis.

Feedback

Your feedback is important to us and helps us influence care in the future. Following your discharge from hospital or attendance at your outpatient appointment you will receive a text asking if you would recommend our service to others. Please take the time to text back, you will not be charged for the text and can opt out at any point. Your co-operation is greatly appreciated.

Further information

Inflammatory Bowel Specialist Nurses

Tel: 0151 706 2659

Text phone number: 18001 0151 706 2659

Email: IBDnurses@rlbuht.nhs.uk

Website: crohnsandcolitis.org.uk/mersey

All Trust approved information is available on request in alternative formats, including other languages, easy read, large print, audio, Braille, moon and electronically.

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