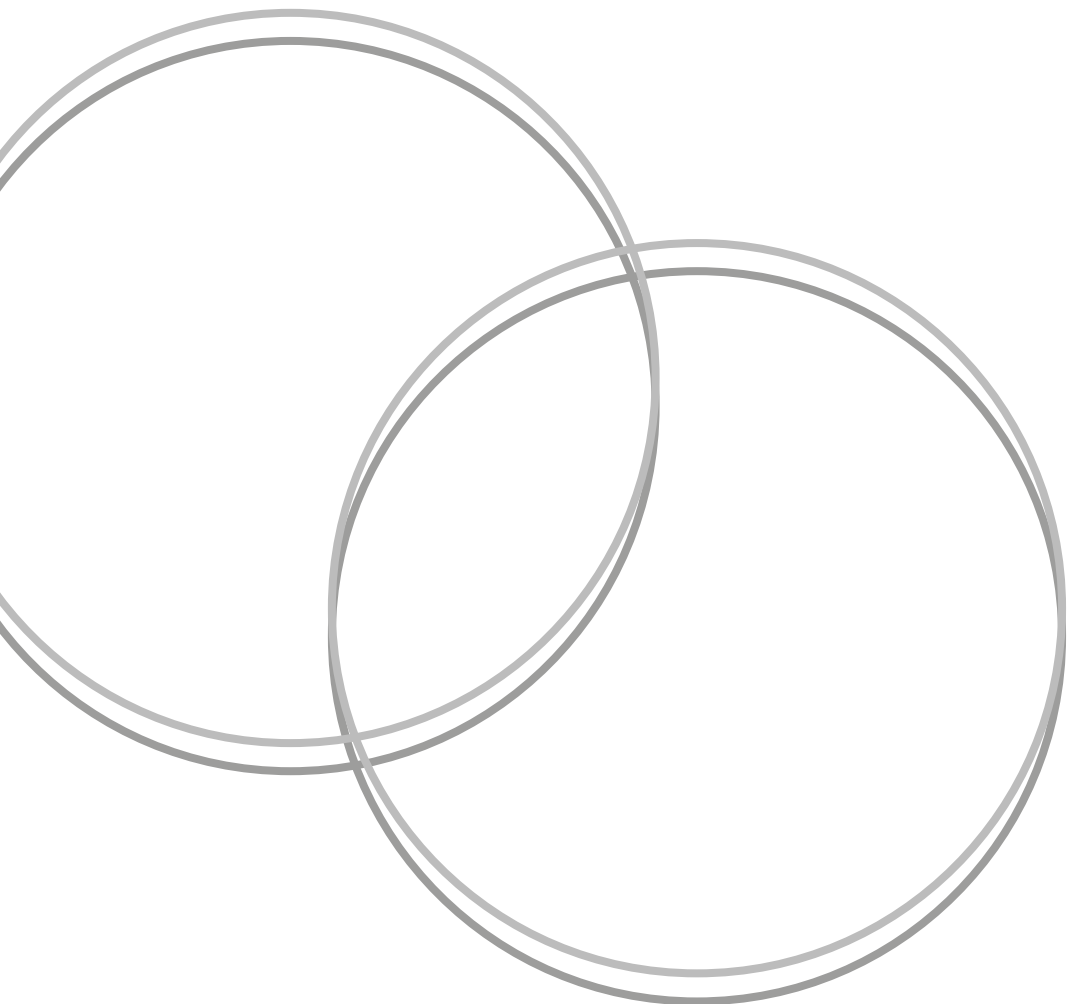




Oxford University Hospitals
NHS Foundation Trust

Azathioprine

Information for patients



Ocular Inflammation Service
Oxford Eye Hospital

Why am I taking azathioprine?

Your doctor has prescribed azathioprine for the treatment of your eye condition. It is an immunosuppressive drug which targets the immune system more precisely than steroids. Azathioprine reduces inflammation by dampening down the over-activity of the immune system cells. In order to have an effect it should be taken regularly.

The tablets

Azathioprine comes as 25mg or 50mg tablets. The dose you are prescribed will depend on your weight and how active your disease is. You will be given instructions by your pharmacist on how many tablets you need to take and when to take your dose.

How long will it take to work?

Azathioprine does not help everyone who takes it. If it does help you, your condition may take several weeks to improve. Do not be discouraged if you do not see any improvement straight away.

Other medicines

There is a potential risk that azathioprine could be affected by or may have an effect on other medicines. Please make sure you tell us about any current medicines you are taking. Do not start any new medicines without discussing with a healthcare professional first. This includes any over the counter or herbal remedies. You should also avoid alcohol except in small quantities (e.g. 1 to 2 units/small glasses of wine or half pints of beer per day).

Are there any side effects?

As with most medicines, you may experience side effects with azathioprine. These include indigestion, nausea and vomiting. Sometimes these side effects may be severe and might be accompanied by symptoms such as diarrhoea and/or flu-like symptoms, with fever and general aches and pains.

Other adverse reactions include skin rashes, hair loss, a high temperature, joint pains and breathing problems. If you develop any of these symptoms, please speak to your GP or one of the eye doctors or nurses at the Oxford Eye Hospital as soon as possible.

Very occasionally azathioprine can affect the liver or the number of white blood cells produced by the bone marrow. These important side effects can be detected by blood tests. It is **very important** that you have these tests, so that we can make sure that the drug suits you and isn't causing these problems.

If you develop a sore throat, cough, fever or other symptoms that last for longer than 3 days, report to your GP as soon as possible. These symptoms could be caused by a low count of white cells in your blood.

Blood tests for monitoring the treatment

You will need to have a blood test two weeks after starting treatment and then further blood tests every month for the next three months. If there are no adverse effects detected, the blood tests will then be required every two to three months. These blood tests will usually be done at your GP surgery. It is very important that you have these tests. We need to regularly monitor your blood because azathioprine can suppress normal bone marrow function and white blood cell production, and may also cause problems with your liver function. If your liver is affected, it can take time for it to recover, even after you stop taking azathioprine. The blood tests will tell us if your liver has been affected and how well it is recovering.

Previous illness, pregnancy and breastfeeding

Before starting azathioprine you must tell your doctor if you have had hepatitis or a high alcohol intake in the past. This is because your liver may have already been damaged and taking azathioprine may increase the risk of you developing severe liver problems.

Azathioprine can increase the risk of miscarriage or birth defects. If you are female, you should use contraception whilst on azathioprine and for 3 months after stopping the drug. Please inform your doctor as soon as possible if you plan to become pregnant or think that you may be pregnant so they can discuss the risks versus the benefits of continuing with the medication with you.

If you are breastfeeding or planning to breastfeed, please discuss this with your doctor.

If you are male, taking azathioprine and planning on fathering a child, we advise that you discuss this with a healthcare professional first.

Avoiding infections

As azathioprine is an immunosuppressant, this means your body's resistance to infection can be reduced while you are taking azathioprine. You should avoid close contact with people who have infections. Azathioprine affects the way the body's immune system works, which can make you more likely to catch infections. Chicken pox or shingles can affect the eye, so if you develop either of these you should report to your GP immediately. Also, if you develop a mild infection such as a cold or sore throat you should inform your GP, as these may develop into a more serious illness. You should consult your GP before having any vaccinations.

As your immune system is lowered, you also need to avoid eating bacteria. Do not eat soft cheese from unpasteurised milk. Reheat ready-meal foods or foods that have been frozen thoroughly and wash salads well. Avoid ready prepared supermarket salads as these have an increased risk of containing salmonella. If you feel unwell from eating any of these foods, please consult your GP immediately.

Additional information

If you have any further questions or need advice about your treatment please speak to your GP or your eye professional at the Oxford Eye Hospital (contact details below).

How to contact us

Oxford Eye Hospital Helpline

Telephone: **01865 234 567**

Monday to Friday, 8.00am to 6.00pm

Eye Hospital Emergency

Call our specialist telephone triage number if you need **URGENT** help or advice:

Telephone: **01865 234 567** option **1** followed by option **1**

Monday to Friday 8:30am to 4:30pm

Saturday and Sunday 8:30am to 3:30pm (including Bank Holidays)

You will be able to speak to an ophthalmic health professional who will advise you.

If you need advice out of hours, please phone NHS 111 or your out of hours GP practice.

For **non-urgent** queries you can also email the ocular inflammation service at oeu.uveitis@ouh.nhs.uk. This email account is monitored Monday to Friday. We will aim to respond to you within 7 days.

Further information

If you would like an interpreter, please speak to the department where you are being seen.

Please also tell them if you would like this information in another format, such as:

- Easy Read
- large print
- braille
- audio
- electronic
- another language.

We have tried to make the information in this leaflet meet your needs. If it does not meet your individual needs or situation, please speak to your healthcare team. They are happy to help.

Author: Miss S. Sharma and Mr L. Thomas
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Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust
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