

# Azathioprine

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Azathioprine is used to treat rheumatoid arthritis, lupus (SLE), myositis, inflammatory bowel disease and vasculitis

# We are Arthritis UK

We're the 10 million adults, young people and children living with arthritis. We're the carers, researchers and healthcare professionals. The families and the friends. All united by one powerful vision: a future free from arthritis. So that one day, no one will have to live with the physical, emotional and practical challenges that arthritis brings.

There are many different types of arthritis. And we understand that every day is different. What's more, what works for one person may not help another. That's why our trusted information blends the latest research and expert advice with a range of lived experiences. In this way, we aim to give you everything you need to know about your condition, the treatments available and the many options you can try, so that you can make better-informed choices to suit your needs.

We're always happy to hear from you whether it's with feedback on our information, to share your story, or just to find out more about the work of Arthritis UK. **Contact us at [healthinfo@arthritis-uk.org](mailto:healthinfo@arthritis-uk.org)**

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# Introduction

**Azathioprine is a drug that can help manage your condition. You can discuss the benefits and risks of taking azathioprine with your doctor or healthcare team before you start treatment, so you're able to make an informed decision.**

## What is Azathioprine?

**Azathioprine is a disease-modifying anti-rheumatic drug (DMARD). It's also known by the brand names Imuran or Azapress.**

In conditions like rheumatoid arthritis and lupus, the immune system attacks parts of your body by mistake. Azathioprine can dampen down the activity of the immune system. This can reduce the inflammation that makes your joints painful, swollen and stiff.

Azathioprine isn't a painkiller, but it can treat your condition. Your symptoms should start to improve 10–12 weeks after you start taking it.

# Who can take Azathioprine?

## You may be prescribed azathioprine for:

- rheumatoid arthritis
- lupus (SLE)
- myositis
- vasculitis
- inflammatory bowel disease.

Azathioprine is a very effective drug for many people with arthritis. But it's not suitable for everyone.

Your doctor might not prescribe azathioprine if:

- you have severe kidney problems
- you have bone marrow problems
- you have infections that repeatedly come and go
- you have severe liver problems
- you're taking medicines to treat gout, such as allopurinol.

Before prescribing azathioprine, your doctor will order a blood test for an enzyme called TPMT, also known as thiopurine methyltransferase. This enzyme helps to break down and remove azathioprine from the body.

Low levels of TPMT could slightly increase the risk of you getting side effects from azathioprine, so your doctor may suggest a lower dose. If the TPMT result is very low, your doctor or healthcare team may not be able to prescribe azathioprine.

Azathioprine can affect your blood count and liver. You'll need to have blood tests before taking azathioprine.

You'll be checked for HIV infection, and hepatitis B and C infections. Azathioprine may increase the risk of these conditions starting up again or getting worse.

If you smoke, it's worth cutting down or ideally giving up. Smoking increases the chance of complications related to your condition, including infections.

You'll need regular tests while taking azathioprine to monitor its effects.

## How is Azathioprine taken?

**Azathioprine is given as tablets, taken once or twice daily. They should be swallowed whole and taken with or after food.**

You'll usually start on a low dose of about 50 mg, but your dose may be increased gradually depending on your condition and side effects. How much you weigh can affect the dose you're given.

Because it's a long-term treatment, unless your doctor or healthcare team says otherwise, it's important to keep taking azathioprine:

- even if it doesn't seem to be working at first
- even when your symptoms start to improve, to help keep your condition under control and prevent flare-ups.

# Side effects and risks

**Few people have side effects, and for those who do, they are rarely serious. But if you do have severe side effects or are concerned about your symptoms, speak to your doctor or healthcare team.**

Azathioprine may cause:

- nausea or feeling sick
- vomiting
- diarrhoea
- loss of appetite
- hair loss
- skin rashes
- sensitivity to sunlight.

Because azathioprine affects the immune system, it can make you more likely to pick up infections.

You should tell your doctor or healthcare team straight away if you develop any of the following after starting azathioprine:

- a sore throat, fever or any other signs of infection
- unexplained bruising or bleeding
- yellowing of the skin or eyes, known as jaundice
- any new symptoms that concern you.

Contact your doctor or healthcare team if you get chickenpox or shingles, or if you come into contact with someone who has them and you've never had chickenpox before. These illnesses can be worse than usual if you're on azathioprine. You may need treatment for them, and your azathioprine may be stopped until you're better.

Some drugs, like azathioprine, may make you more sensitive to the sun and could put you at a higher risk of skin cancer. To be on the safe side, make sure to wear SPF 30 or higher sunscreen and regularly check your skin for any new spots or changes to your freckles or moles.

### Tips to reduce your risk of infection

- Try to avoid close contact with people you know have an infection.
- Wash your hands regularly and carry around a small bottle of antibacterial hand gel.
- Keep your mouth clean by brushing your teeth regularly.
- Stop smoking if you're a smoker.
- Make sure your food is stored and prepared properly.
- Try to keep your house clean and hygienic, especially the kitchen, bathrooms and toilets.

# Taking other medicines

**If you're taking azathioprine, check with your doctor or healthcare team before starting any new medicines. And remember to mention you're on azathioprine if you're treated by anyone other than your usual healthcare team.**

Azathioprine can interact with medicines used to treat gout, such as allopurinol and febuxostat. It can also interact with some medicines used to prevent blood clots, such as warfarin, and medicines to control high blood pressure.

If you are on any of these medicines, tell your doctor or healthcare team. They might suggest a different DMARD.

You can carry on taking a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug (NSAID) or painkillers if needed, unless your doctor advises otherwise.

Before using complementary treatments, such as herbal remedies, discuss it with your doctor or specialist, as some could react badly with azathioprine.

## Vaccinations

Depending on your dosage and if you're on any other medicines, you might need to avoid some live vaccines. Talk to your healthcare team about this.

It's very important that you have the pneumonia vaccine, yearly injectable flu vaccines and COVID-19 vaccine to reduce your risk of infection. These vaccines are not live, so it's safe for you to have them.

The shingles vaccine, Shingrix, is a non-live vaccine. It's recommended that you have it if you're taking azathioprine.

## Having an operation or dental procedure

If you're having surgery or a dental procedure, talk to your surgeon or healthcare team. They'll advise you on whether you need to stop azathioprine before and after the procedure.

# Alcohol

**Alcohol and azathioprine can both affect your liver, so it's best to avoid alcohol while taking azathioprine.**

# Fertility, pregnancy and breastfeeding

**If you're planning a family or become pregnant while taking azathioprine, you should discuss this with your doctor or healthcare team as soon as possible.**

Current guidelines say that azathioprine can be taken if trying for a baby and when pregnant or breastfeeding.

Men are also fine to continue taking it when trying for a baby.



This booklet is a guide to azathioprine, its benefits and potential side effects. If there's anything else you'd like to know about this drug, speak to the healthcare professionals in charge of your care.

# Notes

# Notes

# Discover our support services

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Chat with AVA, our online assistant, go to:  
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Track your symptoms with our easy app, go to:  
**[arthritis-uk.org/track-my-arthritis-symptoms-app](https://arthritis-uk.org/track-my-arthritis-symptoms-app)**

# Thank you!

**A team of people helped us create this booklet. We would like to thank:**

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# Support our work

At Arthritis UK we rely on donations to fund our work. Help support people with arthritis and fund life-changing research by making a donation today. Every contribution makes a difference.

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