

Liver nurse helpline:

0151 430 1981

Office hours:

Monday—Friday 08:30—16:30
Excludes bank holidays

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Azathioprine in autoimmune hepatitis

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Jeśli niniejsza ulotka ma być dostępna w innym języku lub formie, proszę skontaktować się z członkiem personelu, który ją dla Państwa przygotowuje.

Dacă aveți nevoie de această broșură într-o altă limbă sau într-un format accesibil, vă rog să discutați cu un membru al personalului să se ocupe de acest lucru pentru dumneavoastră

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إذا احتجت إلى هذه النشرة بلغة أخرى، أو بتنسيق يسهل الوصول إليه، يرجى التحدث إلى أحد الموظفين لترتيب ذلك لك.

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What is autoimmune hepatitis?

Autoimmune Hepatitis (AIH) is an 'autoimmune disorder' against the liver. This means that your body's immune system (the body's defence against illness) attacks your body's own cells and organs.

In AIH your own immune system attacks your own liver, causing inflammation which over time if untreated can cause permanent liver damage (scarring / cirrhosis) and eventually lead to liver failure.

AIH is uncommon with around 10,000 cases in the UK.

It can develop in both men and women, but is most commonly seen in women between the ages of 45-65 years of age.

Around 30% of people diagnosed with AIH have another autoimmune disorder like thyroid disease, rheumatoid arthritis, type I diabetes or coeliac disease.

AIH is a so-called 'relapsing-remitting' disease that blows 'hot and cold'. The goal of treatment is to keep the disease 'cold' (in remission) by 'dampening-down' inflammation in the liver.

What is azathioprine?

Azathioprine is an immunosuppressant medication, that dampens the body's immune system. This is useful in conditions like AIH where the immune system is 'over-active'.

Notes

Can I have vaccinations while on azathioprine?

The flu vaccine is safe with azathioprine. You should have this annually.

You should avoid immunisations with 'live' vaccines such as polio, BCG (tuberculosis) and MMR (measles, mumps and rubella).

Does azathioprine affect fertility, pregnancy or breastfeeding?

Azathioprine has a good safety profile in pregnancy. You should continue taking it when pregnant as stopping could result in a flare up of AIH.

Only tiny amounts of azathioprine are found in breast milk and there is no evidence of harm to children that have been breastfed.

What are the benefits of azathioprine?

The main benefit of azathioprine is to reduce inflammation in the liver, which in turn prevents long-term liver damage / 'scarring'. It also helps to spare patients from high doses of steroid medication (which has its own side effects). Its main role is to keep your liver healthy rather than to improve any symptoms you may have.

What dose & how often? What happens if I miss a dose?

Your specialist will start you on a once daily dose that is appropriate for your weight. Any dose changes after that will be guided by the liver team. Do not alter the dose yourself.

It is extremely important you do not miss any doses, as this will reduce how well the medicine works. Azathioprine can be taken at any time although it is best to get into the habit of taking it at the same time of the day each day, as this reduces the chances of missing a dose. If you do miss a dose do not worry, simply start again the next day – do not double the dose after a missed day.

Monitoring

Patients taking immunosuppressants like azathioprine require regular blood monitoring. This is most intensive when treatment is started or when doses are altered – the liver team will tailor this to your case. Once you are on a stable dose, we usually require a blood test monitoring every three months.

How long will it take to work?

It usually takes up to 12 weeks for azathioprine to get into your system and have an effect on the liver. During this time it is likely you will be on reducing doses of steroid medication too.

How long will I be on azathioprine?

AIH is a disease that tends to 'burn itself out' in around 2-3 years, after which (in most cases) treatment withdrawal can be considered. The liver team will guide this decision when the time is right.

What are potential side effects of azathioprine?

When you first start treatment or your dose is increased, the most common side effect is nausea and vomiting. If you experience this, we may suggest taking the medication with food, or splitting the daily dose to twice daily. You should discuss this with your liver nurse.

Some people experience flu-like illness, with fever and general aches. You should tell your specialist if these symptoms persist.

As azathioprine works by suppressing your immune system, you can be more prone to infection. Inexplicable bruising, bleeding or infection may be a sign of bone marrow suppression and must be reported immediately.

Other symptoms may include; dizziness, fatigue, mouth ulcers and rash.

If new symptoms develop, you should contact your family doctor (GP) or liver nurse specialist.

Azathioprine also increases the skin's sensitivity to sunlight. This heightens the risk of developing certain skin cancers. It is important that you reduce this risk by applying UV protection (sun cream) to sun exposed areas whenever outside. You should avoid using sunbeds or sunlamps.

Severe side effects

If you have severe side effects such as severe nausea and vomiting or abdominal discomfort particularly in the first two weeks of starting the medication, we recommend that you should stop azathioprine and contact the liver helpline (0151 430 1981) the next working day.

If this is on a weekend and your abdominal pain is severe and persistent, you should go to the closest A&E department for urgent assessment.

What will happen if I decide not to take azathioprine?

Please discuss your reasons with a member of the liver team as soon as possible.

Can I take other medication with azathioprine?

Some medications react with azathioprine, so it is important that you tell any doctor treating you that you are taking them.

Use of allopurinol should be avoided while on azathioprine.