

Liver Nurse Helpline:

0151 430 1981

Office hours:

Monday - Friday 08:30 - 16:30

Excludes bank holidays

Whiston Hospital
Warrington Road,
Prescot, Merseyside, L35 5DR
Telephone: 0151 426 1600

St Helens Hospital
Marshall Cross Road,
St Helens, Merseyside, WA9 3DA
Telephone: 01744 26633

 /sthknhs  @sthk.nhs
www.sthk.nhs.uk



St Helens and Knowsley
Teaching Hospitals
NHS Trust

Azathioprine in Autoimmune Hepatitis

This leaflet can be made available
in alternative languages / formats on request.

如有需要，本传单可提供其他语言/版式
此單張的其他語言/格式版本可按要求提供

Na żądanie ta ulotka może zostać udostępniona
w innych językach/formatach.

Author: Nurse specialist
Department: Gastroenterology
Document Number: STHK1664
Version: 001
Review Date: 31 / 05 / 2024

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 U.K.

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'.

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.

Severe Side Effects

If you have severe side effects such as severe nausea and vomiting or abdominal discomfort particularly in the first 2 weeks of starting the medication we recommend that you should **stop** Azo 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 Accident and Emergency 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.

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).

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 and 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 immunosuppressant's 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 3 months.

How long will it take to work?

It usually takes up to 12 weeks for Azathioprine to get into your system and have its full anti-inflammatory 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.

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.

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.

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.