



Living with pulmonary fibrosis: Immunosuppressant medication

Azathioprine (Imuran)



Disclaimer

This resource provides some information about the immunosuppressant medication azathioprine. It does not contain all the available information and **does not take the place of talking to your doctor or pharmacist**. Always seek the guidance of your doctor or other qualified health professional for any questions you may have regarding medications, your health or medical conditions. Please refer to the Consumer Medicine Information leaflet linked below for a more detailed guide to side effects and safety precautions.

Why is this medication being recommended?

Azathioprine belongs to a group of medications known as immunosuppressants. Azathioprine affects your body's immune system and reduces the amount of inflammation in your lungs.

Inflammation may lead to fibrosis (scarring) in the lungs. By reducing inflammation, azathioprine may prevent the formation of more lung fibrosis, and, in some cases may allow the inflamed lung to return to normal.

When starting azathioprine, your doctor will tell you how much to take and when to take it. Usually, the medication is taken once or twice a day, and the dose is typically increased over a few months until you reach the right dose for you. You will need to have regular blood tests, usually monthly to start and then every three to four months. Your doctor might change the dose if necessary.

What special precautions should I follow?

Before taking azathioprine:

- Tell your doctor and pharmacist if you are allergic to azathioprine or any other medications.
- Tell your doctor and pharmacist if you are taking any other prescription and non-prescription medications, vitamins, nutritional supplements, and herbal products. Your doctor may need to change the dose of your medications or monitor you carefully for side effects.
- Azathioprine is generally not recommended to be taken by pregnant women. Consult your doctor if you are pregnant or breast feeding, or if you or your partner plan to become pregnant.
- Talk to your doctor about effective methods of contraception if you or your partner could become pregnant.
- Tell your doctor if you have any type of infection, or if you have previously had kidney or liver disease, or a history of skin cancer.

While taking azathioprine:

- Avoid infection by staying away from people who have easily transmitted infections, especially chickenpox or shingles, and washing or sanitising your hands often.
 - Vaccinations are important. Discuss vaccination schedules with your doctor while on azathioprine and always check before receiving a vaccine.
- Avoid pregnancy or planning a pregnancy. Use contraception. If you become pregnant, tell your doctor immediately.
- Do not breastfeed while you are taking this medication.
- If you are having surgery, including dental surgery, tell the doctor, anaesthetist, or dentist that you are taking azathioprine.
- Avoid bruising and cuts as much as possible.
- Be sun smart - wear a long sleeve shirt, hat and SPF 50 sunscreen while in the sun to reduce the risk of skin cancer.

What side effects can this medication cause?

Immune suppressing medications can decrease your ability to fight infection. You need to be alert to the signs of infection and see your doctor immediately if you are concerned.

- Be alert for fever (particularly above 38 degrees Celsius), chills, lethargy or other signs of infection.

Azathioprine may cause other side effects. Tell your doctor if any of these symptoms are severe or do not go away:

- Abdominal pain
- Unusual bruising or bleeding
- Nausea and vomiting
- Tiredness, dizziness or generally feeling unwell
- Muscle aches, pain or stiffness
- Mouth or lip sores
- Changes in taste or smell
- New or changed moles or marks on your skin or body lumps

- Blood test abnormalities including low blood cell counts and abnormal liver function tests. Regular blood tests are recommended to monitor for this.

Some side effects can be serious. The following symptoms are uncommon, but if you experience any of them contact your doctor immediately:

- Yellowing of the skin or eyes
- Headache, stiff neck and sensitivity to bright light
- Rash
- Severe stomach pain or diarrhoea
- Severe muscle or joint pain, stiffness or weakness
- Rare allergic type reactions such as serious skin reactions including rash, itching, blistering or peeling and difficulty breathing, wheezing or coughing
- Kidney problems
- Black and tarry stools, red blood in stools, bloody vomit.

What monitoring will I need?

Your GP or lung specialist will order regular blood tests to monitor for side effects. These will include blood counts (white blood cells, red blood cells, platelets) and liver tests. There may be additional tests ordered by your doctor depending on the results.

Your specialist will discuss any other side effects you may be experiencing. They will also continue to monitor your lung function (breathing tests) over time to map out the progress of your lung condition. It's helpful to keep your own detailed record of your prescriptions and tests.

Notes on your azathioprine prescription

	Azathioprine dose	Blood test (Yes/No/Date)	Side effects and other notes
Month 1			
Month 2			
Month 3			

FURTHER INFORMATION AND SUPPORT

Lung Foundation Australia Services

- Information and Support Team
- Lung disease information resources
- Education webinars
- Support groups
- Peer-to-peer connections

- Referral to pulmonary rehabilitation and Lungs in Action exercise programs

External Links

- Azathioprine (Imuran) Consumer Medicine Information leaflet: [tga.gov.au](https://www.tga.gov.au)

[Lungfoundation.com.au](https://www.lungfoundation.com.au) | Freecall 1800 654 301 | enquiries@lungfoundation.com.au

We thank the individuals and teams who contributed to the content and expert review of this fact sheet, in particular, the Interstitial Lung Disease Clinic team at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital.

Note to reader: This information is intended as a general guide only and is not intended or implied to be a substitute for professional medical advice or treatment. While all care is taken to ensure accuracy at the time of publication, Lung Foundation Australia, the Centre of Research Excellence in Pulmonary Fibrosis and its members exclude all liability for any injury, loss or damage incurred by use of or reliance on the information provided. Always consult with your doctor about matters that affect your health.

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