

# Imuran<sup>®</sup> (azathioprine)

## Medication information for patients and families

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### What is Imuran?

Imuran is a medication that reduces the activity of the immune system. This type of medication is called an immunosuppressive. Imuran comes in 50 mg tablets.

Azathioprine is the generic name for this medication. Other names for this medication include: Alti-Azathioprine<sup>®</sup> and Gen-Azathioprine<sup>®</sup>.

Imuran has been used for 40 years to prevent rejection of kidney transplants. We use it in much smaller doses to treat inflammatory bowel disease (IBD).

### How can Imuran help IBD?

Although Imuran cannot cure bowel disease, it can help reduce symptoms and prevent flare-ups. It helps by reducing inflammation in the digestive system. You may need to take Imuran for several years.

Imuran may be used if your bowel disease is hard to control, or you have not responded well to steroids and other medications that reduce inflammation.

Imuran does not work right away. It may take 3 to 6 months to get the full effect. During this time, you will still need to take Prednisone or other medications.

Imuran does not replace the need for other medications that reduce inflammation, such as 5-aminosalicylic acid or 5-ASA. Other names for this medication include: mesalamine, Mesasal<sup>®</sup>, Pentasa<sup>®</sup> and Salofalk<sup>®</sup>. You may still need to take these medications while taking Imuran.

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## What should I consider before taking Imuran?

Before you take Imuran, you should be immune to chickenpox. A simple blood test can tell if you are immune or not. If you had chickenpox in the past, you should already be immune. If you have not had chickenpox, you can have an injection of a vaccine to make you become immune.

There has been a concern that taking Imuran for a long time may slightly increase the risk of cancer. After many years of study, the risk of cancer appears to be very small. You will need to consider this risk. Many patients feel the benefits of taking Imuran outweigh the risks, when their disease is hard to treat or control.

## How do I take Imuran?

Take this medication once a day, exactly as directed by your doctor. To avoid stomach upset, take Imuran with some food or milk. You may crush the tablets if you wish.

There are no restrictions on what you can eat or drink while taking Imuran. Imuran does not interact with alcohol or tobacco.

The dose is based on your age, weight and how active your disease is. The goal is to control your disease with the lowest possible dose. So the first dose you take will be low. As the dose is increased, we will check your response and watch for any side effects.

If you forget a dose, take it as soon as you remember. If you don't remember until the next day, skip the missed dose. Take your next dose at the usual time. Do not take 2 doses at one time.

## What should I remember while taking Imuran?

Carry or wear medical alert identification to show that you take Imuran (azathioprine).



Tell all your health care providers that you are taking Imuran, especially when you need dental work or surgery. There is no need to stop taking Imuran before your dental work.

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Some medications can increase the levels of Imuran in the blood, which can lead to serious side effects. Let your doctor and pharmacist know about all the medications you are taking, including prescription, non-prescription ('over-the-counter'), herbal medicines and supplements.

You can receive immunizations as long as the vaccine does not contain a live virus. These vaccines are live and should be avoided:

- × Measles, mumps and rubella (MMR)
- × Varicella (chicken pox)
- × Flu mist (live vaccine given as a nasal spray)
- × Rotavirus

While taking Imuran you should have a flu shot (influenza vaccine) each year.

Methotrexate can make your skin more sensitive to sunlight. Protect yourself by avoiding direct sunlight. While in the sun, wear sunscreen and sunglasses that block ultraviolet (UV) light, a hat and clothing that covers your skin.

If you are sexually active, use an effective birth control method. Talk with your doctor if you are planning to become pregnant. Although birth defects have been reported with large doses of Imuran, there is now evidence for its safe use in pregnancy.

## What side effects are possible with Imuran?

As with any medication, side effects are possible, especially when starting Imuran.

Some side effects are temporary, and usually go away when the dose of Imuran is lowered. These side effects include:

- loss of appetite
- nausea, vomiting
- diarrhea
- skin rash
- thinning hair

More serious side effects can occur. Although it is rare, a few people may develop an inflammation of the pancreas, called pancreatitis. After taking Imuran for a longer time, you can become more likely to get infections. This is because Imuran suppresses the immune system, which reduces the body's ability to fight infection.

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## Serious side effects may include:

- **Signs of infection**, such as fever (a temperature greater than 38°C or 100.4°F), chills or sore throat.
- **Signs of abnormal bleeding**, such as bruising, black or bloody bowel movements, red urine.
- **Signs of jaundice**, such as yellow coloured skin or eyes, dark urine.
- **Signs of pancreatitis**, such as severe stomach pain and vomiting.
- feeling extremely tired or weak
- sores on the lips or in the mouth
- feeling short of breath
- a very bad cough that does not go away

**Call your doctor right away if you have any of these side effects.**

## What happens if I get an infection?

If you get an infection, call the clinic doctor or nurse. The doctor may advise you to stop taking Imuran for 3 to 5 days. When the infection gets better you can go back to taking your usual dose of Imuran and have follow-up blood tests.

If you get chickenpox, stop taking Imuran and call the clinic.

If you have severe stomach pains, you should be seen by a doctor in the clinic or the Emergency Department. A blood test for amylase can help the doctor tell if you have pancreatitis. If you develop this infection you will need to stay in hospital and stop taking Imuran. This illness will get better on its own.

## When do I visit the clinic?

You need to visit the clinic regularly so that we can check your response to Imuran and watch carefully for any side effects.

You will also need blood tests regularly:

- When you start taking Imuran, you will need blood tests each week for the first month.
- Then you will need blood tests each month for a while.
- After that, your blood tests will be done every 2 months for a while, then every 3 months.
- This schedule will change whenever your dose of Imuran is changed.

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