PATIENT FACT SHEET

Azathioprine (Imuran)

Azathioprine (Imuran) is used to treat dermatomyositis, systemic lupus erythematosus (lupus), inflammatory bowel disease and vasculitis (inflammation of the blood vessels), and rheumatoid arthritis, as well as other inflammatory conditions. It suppresses the immune system by interfering with DNA synthesis (the creation of DNA molecules).

Azathioprine is usually taken orally [in doses between 50-150mg], once or divided twice daily. The initial dose for rheumatoid arthritis is approximately 1 milligram/kilogram (mg/kg) of body weight. The dose can be increased every 1-2 months, up to a maximum dose of 2.5 mg/kg of body weight, or approximately 75 to 150 mg given twice a day.

The most common side effects of azathioprine can involve the gastrointestinal tract (which includes the stomach, intestines, liver and pancreas) and the blood cells. Taking the medication twice daily instead of all at once, or taking it after eating, may help avoid these problems. Less often, azathioprine may cause damage to the liver, pancreas or an allergic reaction that may include a flu-like illness or a rash. Azathioprine also can lower the number of infection-fighting white blood cells.

You should notify your doctor if you have these symptoms while taking this medication: fever, rash, easy bruising or bleeding, or signs of an infection. If vomiting occurs, you should contact your doctor, as this may be a sign of a serious reaction.

Tell your doctor about all of the medications you are taking, which may include over-the-counter medications and natural remedies. Medications that may interfere with azathioprine and potentially cause serious problems include the gout medication allopurinol (Aloprim, Zyloprim); warfarin (Coumadin); some blood pressure medications, including some angiotensin-converting enzyme (ACE) inhibitors (Accupril or Vasotec); olsalazine (Dipentum); mesalamine (Asacol, Pentasa); and sulfasalazine (Azulfidine).

You should notify your other physicians while you are taking this drug. If you are pregnant or considering pregnancy, let your doctor know before starting this medication. Women should discuss birth control with their primary care physicians or gynecologists. Breast-feeding should be avoided while taking azathioprine because the drug can enter breast milk.

Before or during treatment, your doctor may perform a blood test called TPMT activity level. TPMT helps clear the medication from your system. If you have lower amounts of TPMT, you may be at higher risk for medication toxicity. It is important to take azathioprine as directed and have regular blood tests.

Make sure to notify your other physicians while you are taking this drug. If you are pregnant or considering pregnancy, let your doctor know before starting this medication. Women should discuss birth control with their primary care physicians or gynecologists. Breast-feeding should be avoided while taking azathioprine because the drug can enter breast milk.

Long-term use of azathioprine, in combination with other immune-suppressing medications in transplant patients, has been associated with a slight elevated risk of cancer.

It is also used in combination with other medications to suppress the immune system after organ transplantation to prevent rejection of transplanted organs.

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