

## **Azathioprine**

### **What is it?**

- Azathioprine is used to treat various types of kidney disease.

### **Why did my doctor prescribe or recommend it?**

- Healthy kidneys filter out excess water, salts, and waste products from the blood in our body. They do this through many tiny filters that the blood flows through. You have a kidney disease because your immune system is damaging these tiny filters causing them to scar up and stop working.

### **How does it work?**

- Azathioprine works by decreasing your immune system's response (weakening your immune system). The goal is to make the kidney disease less active before the inflammation leads to permanent kidney damage.

### **How long will I be on it?**

- Azathioprine may be used for up to 12 to 18 months although some people may need it longer. Ask your kidney doctor how long you will be expected to be on azathioprine.

### **What doses are recommended?**

- The dosage is based on your medical condition, weight, response to therapy, the side effects you experience, and your level of kidney function.

### **Are there safety concerns?**

- Before this medication starts, you will be asked to do a blood test to see if your body can normally metabolize (get rid of) this drug to prevent toxicity from occurring.
- Do NOT use Allopurinol (a medicine used to prevent gout) while on Azathioprine. Using these two medications together can increase your risk of developing life threatening effects on your blood cells.
- This medication can lower the body's ability to fight an infection. Notify your doctor promptly if you develop any signs of an infection such as fever, chills or persistent sore throat. The doctor may put you on an antibiotic to lower the chance of getting sick with an infection.
- This medication may have adverse effects on your liver. We can monitor for any effects on your liver by doing blood work regularly.

- Azathioprine may decrease your white blood cells (cells that fight infections), platelets (cells that help your blood to clot), or your red blood cells (cells that deliver oxygen). Your kidney doctor will order regular blood tests to make sure that these cells do not drop too low. It is very important to do all the blood tests ordered while you are on Azathioprine.
- Azathioprine may increase the risk of developing cancers such as lymphoma, leukemia, and skin cancer.
- Azathioprine may cause nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea. Take this medication with food to reduce these side effects. If the side effects are severe, phone the Renal Health Clinic.

### **While taking azathioprine:**

#### **Should I get the flu vaccine AND pneumonia (Pneumovax®) vaccine?**

- Yes, Azathioprine can decrease the immune system. It is recommended to have the flu shot every year in the Fall. The pneumonia vaccine is recommended once at baseline and then one more time at year five to provide protection against the most common strains of pneumonia.

### **What else can I do?**

**TAKE WITH FOOD**– To prevent stomach upset.

**USE BIRTH CONTROL** – Azathioprine may harm a developing baby.

**CLEAN YOUR HANDS FREQUENTLY** – Azathioprine can increase your risk of infections. Washing your hands with soap and water or using a hand sanitizer before you eat and at other times throughout the day will help prevent infections.

**TRY TO AVOID OTHER PEOPLE WITH INFECTIONS IF POSSIBLE** – If someone you know is sick with a cold, flu, pneumonia, or other infection try to avoid visiting them until they are better. If someone in your house is sick then clean your hands frequently. This is especially important if your white blood cells are low.