

Azithromycin: patient information sheet

What is Azithromycin?

Azithromycin belongs to a family of antibiotics called macrolides. Antibiotics are drugs used to kill bacteria. This class of medication also has effects on the body's immune system as well as effects on the gastrointestinal tract by increasing the movement of food through the gut. All of these actions make this drug beneficial for a variety of respiratory diseases.

Why have I been prescribed azithromycin?

Azithromycin can be used to treat a number of respiratory conditions. It can be used to treat certain infections including non-tuberculous mycobacterial infections. In asthma, COPD and bronchiectasis azithromycin can reduce the number episodes of worsening (exacerbations) a patient has. It also has benefits in organising pneumonia, exacerbations of idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis and chronic cough.

What do I need to know before I take azithromycin?

Do not take this medication if you are allergic to macrolide antibiotics such as erythromycin, clarithromycin or azithromycin.

Patients will normally be asked to provide a sputum sample to check for Mycobacterial infection before starting this medication. Patients with Mycobacterial infection should not start azithromycin without commencing other treatment simultaneously.

Patients will also be asked to have a tracing of their heart (ECG) undertaken, as well as blood tests to measure liver function as rarely azithromycin can affect these organs.

How do I take azithromycin?

When used in asthma, COPD and bronchiectasis, azithromycin is often administered three times weekly (Monday, Wednesday, Friday). When given for cough or Mycobacterial infection this medication may be given daily. The dose administered can vary between 250mg -500mg.

Azithromycin can increase your sensitivity to sun exposure; it is important use a high sun block when taking this medication.

Are there any side effects?

Azithromycin does not normally cause any side effects.

Less than 10% of individuals may experience nausea, diarrhoea, constipation, dizziness, headaches or a skin rash.

Rarely (less than 1%) patients may experience hearing loss. The first symptom of this is often ringing in the ears (tinnitus). If you experience tinnitus or hearing loss, it is important you stop the medication straight away and speak with your doctor.

Very rarely (less than 1:1000) the drug may cause changes in liver function or heart tracing. Your liver function tests will be monitored by your GP every 6 months and your doctor may repeat your heart tracing once on treatment to check for this.

What if I have an infection whilst on azithromycin?

Whilst azithromycin is an antibiotic, it will not treat all infections. If you develop an infection and are prescribed antibiotics, stop the azithromycin for the duration of the course and then reinstate it once you have finished your course.

Will it interact with any of my other medications?

Azithromycin can interact with a number of common medications. It is important to give the prescribing doctor a list of all of your prescribed medications including, theophyllines, warfarin and digoxin. The doses of these drugs may need to be altered.

Can I drink alcohol whilst taking azithromycin?

There are no concerns with regards to alcohol consumption and azithromycin.

Does azithromycin affect fertility or pregnancy?

Azithromycin is not known to have any effects on fertility. The safety of azithromycin in pregnancy is not known and for this reason we advise for women of child bearing age to use adequate contraception when on this medication.

If you have any further questions or concerns please speak to your respiratory nurse, doctor or pharmacist who should be able to help you.