Mercaptopurine
Information for patients, parents and carers

This factsheet provides information on the use of mercaptopurine in children and young people with cancer. Please read this factsheet carefully alongside any patient information provided by the manufacturer. Keep it somewhere safe so you can read it again.

For most medicines, information is provided by the manufacturer in the medicine package. However, this does not always tell you everything you need to know about the use of this medicine in children and young people. We have written this factsheet to give you some extra information.

What is mercaptopurine?
Mercaptopurine is a chemotherapy medicine commonly used in the treatment of certain types of cancer and leukaemia.

What preparations of mercaptopurine are available?
Mercaptopurine is available as 10mg and 50mg tablets. A liquid is available which contains mercaptopurine 100mg/5ml.

Where can I get mercaptopurine from?
Mercaptopurine must only be obtained from the hospital at which you/your child is being treated. Please remember to bring all medication with you at each hospital visit.

How is mercaptopurine given?
Mercaptopurine is given by mouth, once a day. It should be given at least one hour after the evening meal. Instructions will be on the label or on the patient dosing information chart.

Food, milk and milk products such as yoghurt, ice cream and cheese should be avoided for at least one hour before and one hour after mercaptopurine, as milk products can affect how mercaptopurine is absorbed. Mercaptopurine can be taken with water or diluted juice.

If your child is having nasogastric feeds (NG feeds), then the administration of mercaptopurine can be timed around their feeds. The nursing team or pharmacist at your hospital will be able to advise you on this.

The tablets should be swallowed whole with plenty of water or juice. Do not break, crush or chew the tablets. Liquid medicine should be measured in an oral syringe through a bung/stopper in the neck of the bottle (supplied by pharmacy). Your hospital or shared care centre will explain how to measure liquid medicine using a syringe and how to dispose of the syringe after use.
Are there any possible side effects?
It is important to remember that everyone reacts differently to chemotherapy. Some will have very few side effects whilst others will have more. The side effects listed below will not affect everyone who is given mercaptopurine and may be different if more than one chemotherapy drug is given.

What are the common side effects?
Reduced bone marrow function
Blood counts will be checked regularly to see how the bone marrow is working. A low neutrophil count can make you/your child more at risk of infection. A low haemoglobin count indicates anaemia which may make you/your child unusually tired and a low platelet count may cause bruising or bleeding.

Please contact the hospital at which you/your child is being treated if there are signs of any infection, especially a high temperature or if they show signs of unusual tiredness, bruising or bleeding.

What are the less common side effects?
Diarrhoea
This is usually mild. If diarrhoea is severe or continuous, contact the hospital or shared care centre at which you/your child is being treated for advice.

Skin rashes
Mercaptopurine can cause a rash which may be itchy. If this happens contact the hospital or shared care centre at which you/your child is being treated for advice.

Nausea (feeling sick) and vomiting (being sick)
If this occurs it is usually mild. Anti-sickness medicines can be given up to one hour before the mercaptopurine to reduce or prevent these symptoms. Please contact the hospital or shared care centre at which you/your child is being treated if sickness is not controlled.

Temporary effect on liver function
Mercaptopurine can cause some changes to liver function. This should return to normal when the treatment is finished. Blood tests may be taken to monitor liver function (called LFTs – liver function tests). If there is pain on the right side of the abdomen, yellowing of the skin and eyes, or signs of bruising or bleeding, contact the hospital or shared care centre at which you/your child is being treated for advice.

Mouth ulcers
If your/your child’s mouth becomes sore or small ulcers develop, contact the hospital at which you/your child is being treated for advice. Always follow the advice from your hospital on how to take good care of your/your child’s mouth before and during treatment.

Which tests/investigations may take place before, during or after treatment with mercaptopurine?
Full blood count
A full blood count will be done regularly at your hospital or by your community team. The dose of mercaptopurine may need to be adjusted according to the result. The new dose will be recorded on the label or on the patient dosing information chart. Alternatively, you may be telephoned with the new dose.

How should the medicine be handled and stored?
- Keep out of reach and sight of children
- Store the tablets and liquid at room temperature
- Keep out of direct sunlight
- Mercaptopurine liquid has an 8-week expiry once opened. Please ensure you write the date opened on the bottle.
- Always handle these medicines with care. Handle as little as possible and always wear gloves.
- If you are pregnant or think you could be pregnant, please discuss handling instructions with your doctor, nurse or pharmacist

Please read our factsheet on ‘Safe handling of chemotherapy medicines’
Is there anything else I should know about or do?

Contact the hospital at which you/your child is being treated if:

• A dose of mercaptopurine is forgotten
• Vomiting occurs after taking the dose
• Too much mercaptopurine is given

Does mercaptopurine interact with any other medicines?

Some medicines can affect how well mercaptopurine works. Always tell the prescriber about any other medication that is being taken. Make sure and check with the doctor or pharmacist before taking any other medicines. This includes supplements, herbal and complementary medicines.

If you have any questions about mercaptopurine please contact the hospital at which you/your child is being treated. This factsheet only gives general information.

You must always discuss individual treatment with the appropriate member of staff. Do not rely on this factsheet alone for information about treatment. Further information is available on the following websites. This information may not include advice on use in children or young people.

• xpil.medicines.org.uk  • www.macmillan.org.uk

Important contact numbers: