

Aminosalicylates (5-ASA) (Mesalamine, Balsalazide, Sulfasalazine)

What are Aminosalicylates?

Aminosalicylates are a category of medication that are anti-inflammatory to the colon and small intestine without suppressing the immune system. They are effective in inducing and maintaining remission in mild to moderate ulcerative colitis and may be effective in a small subgroup of patients with Crohn's disease. They comprise a number of different preparations including mesalamine (Asacol®, Lialda®, Apriso®, Pentasa®), balsalazide (colazaal®), and sulfasalazine (Azulfidine®)

How is it administered?

Aminosalicylates are administered usually as an oral medication (pill) that is taken once or twice a day. Often, you may need to take more than one pill to achieve the right dosage. The same medications can also be administered rectally as a suppository or enema. Those preparations benefit patients who have inflammation in the lower part of the colon and are typically administered to be retained internally for at least an hour.

When can I expect to respond to Aminosalicylates?

Aminosalicylates usually result in a clinical benefit in mild to moderate ulcerative colitis within 4 weeks of starting it, often sooner. Sometimes, they need to be combined with other medications like a corticosteroid, or administered as a combination of both oral and rectal medication to achieve an effect.

Approximately 5-7 in 10 patients with mild ulcerative colitis will have a benefit with this medication. The benefit of the medication in Crohn's disease is less certain, and many may not have a response at all. However, some patients with mild Crohn's disease may still have some benefit.

What testing is needed on therapy?

Aminosalicylates can cause kidney abnormalities rarely, and for that reason, your kidney function and sometimes a urine test should be performed every 2 years. Since they do not suppress the immune system, you do not need frequent monitoring of your blood counts.

What are the potential side effects related to Aminosalicylates?

Side effects with aminosalicylates are very uncommon. Some patients (fewer than 4 in 100) may experience worsening of diarrhea and bleeding within the first month of use. If you note this, please stop the medication and contact your provider. Rarely (fewer than 1 in 1000 patients) may experience an allergic reaction in the kidney called interstitial nephritis. This is temporary and resolves with cessation of the medication. Other rare side effects include pancreatitis or pericarditis.

Sulfasalazine (but not the other aminosalicylates) makes your body deficient in a vitamin called folic acid. For this reason, as long as you are on sulfasalazine therapy, you need to take a prescription folic acid 1mg daily supplement.

Please see the medication package insert for the full list of potential side effects.

Are Aminosalicylates safe during pregnancy and breast feeding?

Aminosalicylates are generally considered safe during pregnancy and breast feeding and have not been linked to birth defects or preterm birth.

Use of Aminosalicylates in men has been, in some studies, associated with decreased sperm count or impaired motility.

Health maintenance on Aminosalicylate therapy

As in any individual with Crohn's disease or ulcerative colitis, it is important to be up to date with your health maintenance while on Aminosalicylate therapy. This includes being current on all the recommended vaccines. As aminosalicylates are not immunosuppressive medications, it is safe to get live or killed vaccines while on this medication (as long as you are not starting immunosuppression in the next 3 months)

It is also important to be up to date in your general cancer screening including mammograms and pap smears for women, and dermatologic (skin check-ups) for both men and women. Make sure to speak to your primary care doctor about whether you are up-to-date on all your cancer screening and immunizations.

What if the medications are expensive or unaffordable?

There are a number of patient assistance programs available through the manufacturers of aminosalicylate therapy. We recommend going to the drug manufacturer's website to see if there are available patient assistance programs depending on your specific drug. You also may want to look for coupons and discounts available on websites such as www.goodrx.com, www.prescriptionhope.com and www.needymeds.org