

# Azathioprine

Imuran® is another name for this medication.

## How Is This Medication Useful?

Azathioprine is used to treat diseases and disorders caused by an overactive immune system. Azathioprine works by suppressing the immune system.

## Are There Conditions or Times When Its Use Might Cause More Harm Than Good?

- Azathioprine is cleared from the body by the liver and is used very carefully in animals with liver problems.
- Azathioprine should not be used in pregnant animals as it may cause birth defects.
- Azathioprine stops the bone marrow from producing blood cells. Cats are very susceptible to this effect and azathioprine is generally not recommended for use in cats.
- Azathioprine may also increase the risk of cancer later on in life.
- If your animal has any of the above conditions, talk to your veterinarian about the potential risks of using the medication versus the benefits that it might have.

## What Side Effects Can Be Seen With Its Use?

- Azathioprine suppresses the bone marrow from producing blood cells and can cause anemias.
- Azathioprine can also cause damage to the liver and pancreas, especially in dogs.
- Because azathioprine suppresses the immune system, your pet may be more susceptible to infections.
- Azathioprine should not be stopped suddenly in animals who have been taking it, as their immune systems are likely to overreact and cause the disease or disorder to start again.
- Azathioprine can also slow down the immune system of the humans who are giving it to their pets, so you should always wear gloves and wash your hands afterwards when giving this drug.

## How Should It Be Given?

- The successful outcome of your animal's treatment with this medication depends upon your commitment and ability to administer it exactly as the veterinarian has prescribed. Please do not skip doses or stop giving the medication. If you have difficulty giving doses, consult your veterinarian or pharmacist, who can offer administration techniques or change the dosage form to a type of medication that may be more acceptable to you and your animal.
- Some other drugs can interact with this medication, so tell your veterinarian about any drugs or foods that you currently give your animal. Do not give new foods or medications without first asking your veterinarian.
- Humans should wear gloves when giving this drug and wash their hands afterwards as this drug can suppress the immune system of anyone exposed to it.
- If you miss a dose of this medication you should give it as soon as you remember it, but if it is within a few hours of the regularly scheduled dose wait until the regular time. Do not double the dose of azathioprine, as it can be very toxic if overdosed.
- Dogs: Give this drug exactly as instructed by your veterinarian. Dogs usually receive this medication once daily at first and then the dose is given every other day.
- Cats: Azathioprine can severely affect the production of blood cells in cats and is generally not used in this species. If your veterinarian does decide to use this drug in your cat, you should give it exactly as the veterinarian has recommended. You will need to watch your cat very closely for signs of infection or bleeding that might occur as a result of treatment with azathioprine.

## What Other Information Is Important About This Medication?

- The effects of azathioprine on your pet's disease may take as long as 2-6 weeks to occur. Do not discontinue this medication without guidance from your veterinarian, as suddenly stopping azathioprine may make your pet get worse.
- Your veterinarian will need to check your pet's blood every 1-2 weeks when first starting this medication. Do not miss these important follow-up visits with your veterinarian.
- Azathioprine should always be handled with gloves and kept away from children and other pets.
- Azathioprine should be protected from light and moisture.

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### References:

*Plumb's Veterinary Drug Handbook*