

# Azathioprine

- Keep this leaflet safe, as you may need to refer to it again.
- Please ask your vet or veterinary nurse if you have any further questions.
- This medicine has been prescribed for your pet ONLY. Do not take it yourself or give it to another person or any other animal; it may harm them even if their symptoms appear to be the same.

The medicine you have been given for your dog is called azathioprine. It may have a trade name such as Imuran® or Azamune®, but often will just be called azathioprine. This medicine is not recommended for cats.

## What is azathioprine?

Azathioprine belongs to a group of medicines called immuno-suppressants. These act to suppress the immune system in conditions where it starts to attack the body's own cells or tissues (immune-mediated diseases). Immunosuppressant drugs can also be used to treat certain diseases that are associated with ongoing inflammation.

## Why has my pet been prescribed azathioprine?

Azathioprine is used in dogs to help treat different types of immune-mediated disease. Examples include immune-mediated haemolytic anaemia or thrombocytopenia, where the immune system starts to break down the body's own red blood cells or platelets. Azathioprine may be used to treat inflammatory bowel disease, where the bowel is unable to function normally because inflammatory cells have infiltrated the gut wall. It may also be used to help treat skin conditions. Azathioprine is often used alongside corticosteroid drugs, as the combination allows the dose of each individual drug to be reduced. There is often a delay of 3–6 weeks before the effects of azathioprine are seen.

## How should I store azathioprine?

This medicine does not require special storage conditions. For safety, **all medicines should be kept out of the reach and sight of children.**

## How do I give azathioprine tablets to my pet?

**Disposable gloves should be worn at all times when handling and administering this drug. DO NOT split or crush these tablets; only use whole ones.** Try to disguise the tablets in a small amount of a strongly flavoured food that your pet likes. If this is not possible, then the tablet(s) can be placed carefully on the back of your pet's tongue and their mouth held closed until the entire dose has been swallowed. Please consult your vet before doing this as they may be able to offer some practical tips to avoid handling the drug. **Faeces, urine and saliva from dogs taking azathioprine may contain small traces of the drug. Therefore, do not allow your pet to lick your skin (including your hands and face) and make sure they go to the toilet well away from other pets and from people. Wear disposable gloves when picking up faeces in bags. Dispose of faeces in domestic waste.**

## How long will my pet need to take azathioprine?

Your vet will advise you on the length of time for which you will need to give this medicine. This may vary between patients but it is likely to be a long time. Unused tablets and empty containers should be returned to your veterinary practice for safe disposal.

## What should I do if I run out of tablets?

Try not to run out of tablets. Make sure you order more tablets from your vet if your supply is getting low. If you do run out, contact your own vet for further advice and restart the course as soon as possible.

## What should I do if I miss a dose?

If a dose is missed, give the medication as soon as possible. However, it is best to skip the missed dose if it is almost time for your pet's next scheduled dose. **DO NOT** give a double dose to make up for the missed dose and do not exceed the total stated dose in any one 24-hour period.

## What should I do if my pet is accidentally given too many doses?

**Contact your vet immediately** if your dog receives an overdose of azathioprine.

## Can my pet take azathioprine if I am already giving them other drugs?

Tell your vet if you are giving your dog any other medications, even if you think they already know. This includes herbal or off-the-shelf remedies from a pet shop, pharmacy or health store. Do not give your dog azathioprine if they are already taking allopurinol (used to treat bladder stones). Check with your vet if your dog is already taking ACE inhibitors (often used in heart and kidney failure), any anti-cancer drug or sulphonamide-containing antibiotics (including sulfasalazine), as side effects can be increased if these are used together with azathioprine.

## What are the possible side effects of azathioprine for my pet?

Azathioprine may cause bone marrow suppression resulting in abnormally low numbers of red blood cells, platelets and some white blood cells. This can make your dog more susceptible to infections; therefore, regular blood tests are recommended whilst your dog is taking azathioprine. Azathioprine can also cause vomiting and diarrhoea, but the risk of this can be minimized by giving the tablets with a small amount of food. Azathioprine has been known to cause liver problems in some dogs as well as inflammation of the pancreas; this will also be evaluated in the regular blood tests. It may cause poor hair growth. If your dog shows any unusual symptoms whilst taking this medication, please contact your vet.

## The Prescribing Cascade

This medicine is authorized for use in human patients and is used by vets under the 'prescribing cascade'. The medicine is not authorized by the Veterinary Medicines Directorate (VMD), an executive agency of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), for use in dogs/cats/pets. Your vet can explain the 'prescribing cascade' in further detail to you and also explain why they are prescribing this drug for your pet. You will be asked to sign a consent form stating that you understand the reasons that the drug is being prescribed and its possible complications, before the treatment is issued.

While the editors and the BSAVA have made every effort in preparing this information leaflet, the contents and any statements are made in good faith purely for general guidance and cannot be regarded as substitute for professional advice. The publishers, contributors and the BSAVA do not take responsibility for the information provided on this leaflet and hence do not accept any liability for loss or expense incurred (by you or persons that you disseminate the materials to) as a result of relying on content in this leaflet. To this end, you are advised to consult your vet and seek their professional advice before taking any steps set out in this leaflet. If you are a vet, you must not rely on the contents in this leaflet without independently verifying the correctness and veracity of the contents. BSAVA is not responsible for any alterations made to this document from the version supplied.

### **What should I do if my pet is unwell while taking azathioprine?**

If your pet is unwell while receiving medication, you should not give any further doses and should contact your vet as soon as possible for advice.

### **What should I do if a person accidentally takes this drug?**

If a person accidentally takes your dog's tablets, the person should be taken to the local hospital **immediately**. Take this leaflet and any remaining tablets plus their container (even if it is empty) with you.

### **Whom do I contact if I want to know more?**

If you have any questions about this drug or concerns about your dog's health, contact your own vet. They will know your dog's medical history and will know about azathioprine.