

Fleas and Ticks

Just the thought of fleas gets us scratching. You're probably scratching right now! Imagine then how it must feel for a cat and dog that is actually infested by these irritating pests. It's impossible not to feel sorry for them but the good thing is that easing their pain and controlling the problem is really not that difficult to do.



Often the first sign of a flea problem is a dog or cat that is continually scratching. This causes the owner to take a closer look at the pet and they will probably see a few fleas scurrying around the belly or the black, gritty "flea dirt" that is often present at the base of the tail. This flea dirt is actually the blood excreted from the flea and if it is moistened, will turn "blood red".

But, unfortunately, the fleas on the pet represent just 5% of the total flea population in the home. The remaining 95%, including the eggs, larvae and pupae, are hiding in the carpet, furniture and cracks in the floorboards. This means that the treatment chosen to deal with the infestation also has to deal with all of the fleas in the home.

Once on a cat or dog, a flea can lay up to 50 eggs a day. These then fall throughout the home into carpets, floorboards and onto furniture.

The Flea Life Cycle

A flea starts life as an egg. It hatches into a tiny caterpillar-like larva that feeds on the excreta of the adult. The larva then pupates and emerges as an adult flea which immediately seeks out an animal as it must get a blood meal within a few days. The whole cycle can take as little as just 14 days however, in the pupa stage, the flea can lie dormant for up to six months before it hatches. This means that killing the adult flea just isn't enough and indeed, an ongoing routine of flea control is essential for the happiness of the pet as well as the family.

Year-round treatment is necessary to break the flea breeding cycle and to ensure that a cat or dog remains flea free. Start monthly applications of an integrated flea control treatment and continue throughout the year.

Steps to Controlling Fleas

Step 1

Treat all of the dogs and cats in the home with a monthly spot-on treatment that is applied to the back of the neck. These take just a minute to apply and don't cause any discomfort to the animal at all. Ensure that the treatment used is an integrated flea control that kills both adult fleas and breaks the breeding cycle by ensuring that eggs, larvae and pupae never develop into adults. Ask at any Better Pets and Gardens for the best product for your situation.

Step 2

Vacuum all carpets and upholstery regularly to get rid of eggs and to encourage hidden fleas to emerge. Once the fleas emerge, the treatment on the pet will kill them before they have the chance to multiply.

Step 3

Wash all pet blankets and bedding in hot water (at least 60°C) for at least 10 minutes. Wash your own doonas, blankets and sheets also if your pet likes to sleep in your bed also.

Step 4

Spray the inside and outside of kennels with a residual insecticide that will continue to work for 4 to 6 weeks. Also spray the ground around the kennel and any areas where the dog spends time sleeping. Moist, sandy areas are perfect breeding grounds for fleas and should be sprayed also. There are products available that are very safe for pets and are easily mixed into a hand pump and applied.

Step 5

Block off any access holes that your pet might use to get under the house or to moist, shady areas in the garden that fleas often infest.

Step 6

Once the home is flea free, don't let untreated animals inside. It would be shame for any unwanted visitors to come into the home at the same time.

Better Pets and Gardens stocks both integrated flea control treatments and residual insecticides so everything can be picked up in one visit to help deal with flea infestations in the home.

Boarding Kennels

I just picked my dog up from boarding and it has fleas. did they come from there?

Not necessarily. In the pupae stage, fleas can survive for up to 140 days and are protected from any insecticides. The return of the family and the pets to the quiet house after a holiday stimulates the adult fleas to emerge from their cocoon and seek a blood meal. This happens so quickly that it appears that the pets have picked them up from their holiday home.

Fleas on Puppies and Kittens

Fleas on very young kittens and puppies can cause anaemia and may even be fatal but most flea products cannot be used on those that are under 9 weeks old. To treat very young pets it is best to talk to a vet but generally the key is to treat the mother as this will provide protection for the baby. Easy-to-apply flea control products are available for puppies and kittens older than 9 weeks and should be applied every month.

Other Flea Treatments

Multi-action tablets are available that combine an insect growth regulator with a heartworm preventative and a tapewormer. The flea control component prevents flea eggs from hatching thereby reducing numbers but will not kill adult fleas. Other tablets kill the adult fleas but have no residual effect and so do not kill eggs or larvae.

Flea powders and sprays are available which will kill the adult fleas but care has to be taken when applying these, especially on cats that groom themselves by licking. These products are not designed to be ingested so their application instructions must be read very carefully.

Rinses and shampoos applied weekly on a dog will go a long way to kill the fleas that are on the dog at the time that they are washed. Some shampoos are especially effective at soothing the inflammation caused by the saliva from the flea's bite and can be used two or three days before a spot-on treatment is applied.

Most Better Pets and Gardens stores have a DIY dog wash which includes a "Flea and Tick Rinse" making treating these irritating pests much easier. Check our website for your closest dog wash.

Paralysis Ticks

In school, ticks were always a good thing, but for pets, ticks can cause major health problems that can actually be fatal. Dangerous paralysis ticks are usually picked up by a cat or dog as it moves through bush land, long grass or thick vegetation. The paralysis tick latches on to the skin, sucking blood and secreting a toxin that causes terrible reactions in the animal.

The signs of tick toxicity do not appear until the tick has been attached for three to five days and at this stage the only option is an immediate trip to the vet who will remove the tick and treat the symptoms. Delaying this could result in the pet's death.

Of course, it is always best to keep a pet away from bush land but even this isn't enough. Checking the pet daily for ticks and using an effective tick control product are essential.

To make life very easy, integrated flea control products are also effective against paralysis tick but need to be applied fortnightly to protect against them. There is also a spray available that is suited to controlling paralysis ticks on cats and should be applied every three weeks. Ask at any Better Pets and Gardens store for the best product to suit your pet's situation.

Searching for Ticks

Remove the pet's collar as ticks often hide underneath these. Run your hands against the fur, feeling for unusual lumps. Work systematically to cover the whole body including under the legs, inside and behind the ears and all the way to the tip of the tail. They can hide in skin folds and between toes.

Part the hair and look for areas that are red and raised or a "tick crater" which is evidence of where a tick once was.

An adult tick is just 1-2mm long (Figure 1) but one that has been feeding on blood is significantly larger and engorged (Figure 2). If a tick is found, phone the veterinarian immediately and seek advice.



Figure 1.



Figure 2.

Searching for Ticks

Signs can be different for each pet and these can be confused with other ailments. If at all unsure, visit the veterinarian immediately.

1. Wobbly hind legs or not being able to stand up.
2. Vomiting, coughing and retching.
3. Loss of appetite.
4. Change in bark (often muted).
5. Grunting and breathing distress.
6. Anxiety.
7. Paralysis starting from the hind legs moving to the front legs.

