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FLEA CONTROL

Where does my cat get fleas from?

The most common flea found on cats and dogs is the cat flea (*Ctenocephalides felis*). Rarely rabbit fleas or stick-fast fleas are found on cats.

The most important source of cat fleas is newly developed adult fleas in pupae in your house. Adult fleas live and feed on animals but the female lays eggs which fall off into the environment. Under favourable conditions these eggs develop first into larvae and then into pupae. The pupae contain adult fleas which lie in wait for a suitable animal host. Modern carpeted centrally heated homes provide ideal conditions for the year round development of fleas. The highest numbers of flea eggs, larvae and pupae will be found in areas in the house where pets spend most time such as their beds, the furniture and so forth. Even though fleas may be in your house you probably won't see them; the eggs are too small to see without magnification and the larvae which are just visible migrate deep down into carpets, furniture or cracks in floors away from the light. The flea life cycle is most active in the warm, humid months, so fleas are worst in late Spring, Summer and Autumn.

What effect do fleas have on my cat?

Many cats live with fleas but show minimal signs. The following problems can occur:-

- Some cats develop an allergy to flea bites. If these cats are exposed to fleas they groom or scratch excessively and develop skin disease, typically so-called 'miliary' dermatitis.
- Adult fleas live on animals and feed on blood. In kittens and debilitated animals this may cause anaemia. With heavy infestation this flea-anaemia can be life-threatening.
- The flea acts as the intermediate host for the tapeworm (*Dipylidium caninum*). Tapeworm eggs which are shed within tapeworm segments in cat faeces are eaten by flea larvae which develop into infected fleas. Cats become infested by eating infected fleas during grooming. Any cat with fleas is likely also to have a tapeworm infestation.

How can I get rid of fleas on my cat?

This can be a demanding task and requires a three pronged approach. Fleas need to be eliminated from your cat, from any other cats and dogs that you own and from your home. Even this rigorous approach may not give 100% control as there are other sources of fleas that are not amenable to your control such as other people's pets, wild animals and infested environments which your cat may come into contact with outside your house.

What products are available to treat my cat?

Insecticides applied to cats are designed to kill adult fleas. Many products have limited effectiveness because they only work for a few hours after application. This is particularly a problem with flea shampoos and powders; they kill fleas present on your cat at the time of application but have little residual effect so the day after use the cat may again have fleas.

There are now some newer products available from your vets which have good residual action. The 'new generation' flea control products (e.g. 'Frontline') have revolutionised the control of fleas - if applied as directed, fleas are unlikely to be a problem.

ALWAYS READ THE LABEL CAREFULLY - apply the product as instructed and repeat at the intervals stated.

My cat hates being sprayed. What can I do?

Many cats strongly dislike being sprayed. Consult your vet, there are several alternatives available. Flea collars are very convenient but they don't work well enough to cope in the face of an infested environment or provide sufficient control for a flea allergic cat. Some cats will develop a skin reaction to collars. A foam is available which you stroke onto your cat's coat. There are several insecticides which are formulated as "spot ons"; these contain a small volume of liquid which is applied onto the cat's skin on the back of its neck. It is important to remember, however, that most of these treatments are vastly inferior to the new generation spray products that are now available.

How can I treat my home environment?

A number of different products are available which will kill the stages of the flea life cycle present in your home such as:-

- insecticide sprays for use on the house
- sprays containing insect growth regulators for use on the house

- a liquid (for cats) or a tablet (for dogs) which is given to the animal by mouth and which contains a chitin synthesis inhibitor. Adult fleas which feed on the medicated animal produce eggs which are incapable of hatching to produce adult fleas so the development of an infested environment is prevented. All animals in the household need to be treated
- insecticides applied by professional pest control operatives to your house
- professional application of borate powder is now available. This is expensive but carries a one year guarantee. Ask your vet for details.

Sprays for use on the house should obviously be used in places where the flea eggs, larvae and pupae are likely to be. It is worth initially going over the whole of the house and then concentrating on the hot spots - your cat's favourite dozing spots - such as soft furniture, beds and carpets. Once they hatch from the egg flea larvae move away from the light deep into carpets and into other nooks and crannies and it can be difficult to get insecticides into these places. So be sure to move cushions and to move furniture and beds to spray underneath. Other places liked by larvae are skirting boards and the cracks in wooden floors.

Your pet's bedding should be regularly washed at a high temperature or replaced. Regular and thorough vacuuming of your carpets, floors and soft furnishings can remove a large proportion of the flea eggs, larvae and pupae which are present in your home. You will need to throw away and preferably burn the dust bag to prevent eggs and larvae developing in there. Vacuuming prior to the application of a spray to the house is recommended because the vibrations will encourage newly developed fleas to emerge from pupae which will then be killed by the insecticide.

ALWAYS READ PRODUCT LABELS CAREFULLY - apply as instructed, use the quantity suggested and repeat at the intervals stated.

How do I choose which products to use?

A flea control programme needs to be individually tailored and take into account your reasons for doing flea control and the lifestyle of your cat and other pets. **Your vet with his knowledge of the advantages and limitations of the products available is the best person to advise you about this.**

Are insecticides safe for my cat and my family?

Insecticides for flea control should be safe both for animals and humans provided the manufacturer's instructions are carefully followed. One should be particularly careful to avoid combining insecticides with similar modes of action. Always seek your vet's advice if you are unsure about this and always tell your vet about any flea control products you may be using other than those which he has prescribed.

Certain types of pets (e.g. fish, amphibia, reptiles, birds and invertebrates) may be particularly susceptible to some products. Do not use any flea control products in the room in which these pets are kept without first consulting your vet for advice.

I have not seen any fleas on my cat. Why has my vet advised flea control?

Fleas are easy to find if a cat is heavily infested. If fleas are present in smaller numbers it can be harder to see them and they move fast. Try looking on the cat's belly, around the tail base and around the neck. Sometimes adult fleas cannot be found but "flea dirt" can be seen. This is faecal matter from the flea which contains partially digested blood and is a good indicator of the presence of fleas. Flea dirt is small black specks or coiled structures; if you are not sure place them on damp white tissue and they will dissolve leaving a reddish brown blood residue. Flea dirt may be found in cat's bedding even when they cannot be found on the cat.

In cats that develop an allergy to fleas one of the symptoms is excessive grooming. Cats are very efficient at removing debris from their coat's using their tongues and may succeed in removing all evidence of flea infestation i.e. adult fleas and flea dirt. One of the commonest causes of feline allergic skin disease is flea allergy. To investigate this possibility your vet may advise rigorous flea control even though no fleas can be found. If the cat's skin problem improves with flea control then it suggests that flea allergy is involved.

I noticed my cat had fleas after his return from the boarding cattery. Did he get them at the cattery?

Not necessarily. Newly hatched adult fleas can survive for up to 140 days within the pupa. When you and your pets are absent from home for extended periods of time these adult fleas will remain in the pupae because no host is available. As soon as you or your pet returns these fleas will suddenly emerge in large numbers and jump onto cats, dogs and even people in the search for a blood meal.

Despite treating my cat for fleas he still has them. Is there a superflea?

There is no evidence of fleas developing significant resistance to insecticides. Apparent failure of treatment almost always results from inadequate treatment of the home or exposure to other infested environments. Consider treating garden sheds, cars and in the summer favoured outdoor sleeping spots. Bear in mind that your cat may be going into other people's houses. A lot of these problems can be overcome by using a really effective and persistent product on the cat to kill adult fleas (particularly the 'new generation' of fleaicides) in addition to treating your home.