

Fleas and Flea Allergy Dermatitis





What are fleas?

Fleas are very small wingless insects, reddish brown in colour with mouthparts adapted for piercing skin and sucking blood. Their legs are long and enable them to jump 200 times their own body length!

Fleas have a tough body and are able to withstand a lot of pressure. Even a hard squeeze between your fingers is not enough to kill them. Open your fingers and watch that flea jump away unscathed! They live off the blood of animals (including humans) and have a lifespan of 6 - 12 months depending on the environment. Fleas just love humid conditions!

Fleas not only cause a lot of discomfort for your pets but they also carry Tapeworm. Tapeworm are transmitted to your pet when they ingest (eat) the flea carrying the tapeworm as they groom themselves. Flea related diseases also account for over 50% of skin disease cases reported to veterinarians!

What is Flea Allergy Dermatitis?

Flea allergy is the most common cause of itching and scratching in dogs and cats. When a flea bites your pet, it injects a small amount of saliva into the skin. Dogs and cats can develop an allergic reaction

to this saliva and will react to it with severe itching and scratching. The itching can then cause the pet to develop secondary skin infections.



This itching sensation may last for up to 2 weeks after the last flea bite, so your pet only needs to be bitten by one flea every two weeks to be constantly scratching. In fact, most animals with flea allergy have very few fleas as they groom themselves excessively due to the itch. This in turn eliminates the evidence of fleas!

Dogs

The most commonly observed symptoms of flea allergy include biting and scratching around the rump (bottom area), tail base, and groin areas, the creation of "hot spots;" and the development of secondary skin infections.

Cats

May manifest flea bite allergy more subtly. You may see many areas of hair loss and scratching, but more often you will feel small scabs and bumps around their neck and down their backs (miliary dermatitis).



Do you need to see the fleas to diagnose flea allergy?

No. It may seem confusing to be told that your dog or cat has flea allergy dermatitis if you never see fleas. This is mainly due to the fact that your pet has a remarkable capacity to chase and subsequently eat these fleas!

You may find evidence of fleas on your pet by using a fine comb and brushing out the "flea dirt" that they leave behind. This "dirt" looks like small black dots and is the excrement (poo) of the flea. When placed on wet paper, it dissolves in red streaks since it contains partially digested blood.



Flea Comb Example

The adult cat flea spends most of the time living on cats and dogs. Fleas will lay eggs on the animals, but these eggs will rapidly fall off the pets and be distributed in the parts of the environment where the animals spend most of their time. The eggs will hatch into larvae; larvae evolve into pupae (cocoon) that emerge later as adult fleas.

FLEA FACTS

- For one adult flea found on your pet there are at least one hundred immature fleas in the animal's environment.
- 95% of a flea's time is spent in the environment and NOT on the animal.
- A single female flea can lay up to 50 eggs every day!



“All pets in the household, including cats, need to be on a good quality flea control product to effectively control fleas”

How do I prevent fleas?

The only long-term effective and safe therapy for flea allergy dermatitis is to keep your pet from being bitten by fleas. This may seem like an impossible task, but it is not.

Successful resolution of the flea allergic animal's discomfort requires that you do everything possible to minimize the number of fleas that can contact your pet. Flea control must involve all areas of infestation. This means killing the fleas on your pets and in your house and yard.

Treating only once kills the adults and some pre-adults, but will result in reoccurrence of infestation once the resistant eggs hatch or pupae leave their cocoons. The control of fleas is an on-going process, but once initiated, it is not difficult to sustain. The flea control program you use must be tailored to your individual situation.

What product should I use?

The use of an adulticide product for flea-allergic pets or households with flea-allergic pets is the most important part of flea control. There are several "spot-on" formulations available that offer more convenience of application. These products have been shown to be effective when used as instructed and are not absorbed into your pet's bloodstream, (they stay in the skin), making them safe.

Swimming and bathing is allowed while using these products, however bathing is not recommended on most occasions more than once a fortnight.

Accurate dosage is based on the pet's weight. These products are applied by parting the hair between the shoulder blades down the back, and applying the small amount of liquid to the skin (see image below). Application frequency

varies with the product and an individual pet's bathing needs but most are applied every 3 to 4 weeks.

There is a new product on the market which comes in tablet form and is given monthly. It is also very effective for killing and preventing fleas.

As there are a lot of products now available for the prevention of fleas, our staff will advise what the best method of flea control is for your pet. **It is very important you DON'T use dog products on cats. Some flea control products perfectly safe for use on dogs can kill a cat! Read the label and get advice from the practice before applying any flea control product!**

Pyrethrin sprays and foams, although extremely effective and safe, have little residual effect. These products may also have some repellent activity. If you have several pets and only one is allergic, the pets in your household must receive flea control to help control the clinical signs of flea allergy in the affected pet.

All pets in the household, including cats, need to be on a good quality flea control product to effectively control fleas.



Why are fleas so hard to get rid of?

So you applied a quality flea control product recommended by the practice and a few days later you saw no fleas. Then 'BAM!', two weeks later you have an infestation. What's happening?

Several life stages occur before a flea becomes a biting adult. When you apply your flea control product you kill the adult fleas you can see but you still have a lot of fleas in the environment (in your carpet, in your backyard, under the house etc) about to hatch and become adult fleas. This is why you can get rid of the fleas on your pet then all of a sudden get a lot more!

The new fleas will jump on your pet and die also but you won't be flea free until all the fleas in their immature stages in your environment have hatched, jumped onto your pet and die as a result of your flea control product. It takes time and only highlights the fact that it's better to **prevent** fleas than to try and get rid of a flea problem.

What about flea shampoo and flea collars?

Flea shampoos will only kill the adult fleas but have virtually no residual effect and will not prevent re-infestation once they are rinsed off.

Flea collars alone are ineffective because they are not able to sustain high enough concentrations of insecticide over the animal's entire body.

What about garlic?

Brewer's yeast, garlic, vitamin B tablets, and extracts of eucalyptus, tea tree oil, or pennyroyal are NOT flea repellent and provide no protection for your pet.

Lastly, flea combs, although helpful, are similar in effect to the use of flea shampoos alone; they do not prevent re-infestation.

Are there certain times of the year that fleas are worse?

Yes, fleas love warm humid weather so

warm weather brings with it lots of fleas!

I have a cat but I never see fleas on him.

They are there! You'll never get rid of your fleas while you have animals in the house breeding them (pets not on quality flea control). While the dog is killing them, the cat can be breeding them. It goes round and round in circles. ALL pets in the household need to be on a good quality flea control.

My pet is on flea control but I still see the odd flea.

Flea control products don't repel fleas like insect repellent you would use on yourself to repel mosquitoes. Flea control products kill the fleas which means fleas can still jump on your pet. Every time you go for a walk or to the beach your pet can pick up fleas but if your pet is on flea control they won't bring them home to breed in your environment.

I keep my house clean so why do I have fleas? It's embarrassing.

Fleas are an inescapable part of life and no matter how clean your house is, you can still get a flea problem. Fleas do not mean you are dirty!

How can I find out where the fleas are in my house?

Put on a pair of white socks and stand still in areas of the house where your pets sleep, eat etc. You'll see the fleas clearly on your socks and know where they are!

How do I find them in the backyard?

You'll find most of the infestation in cool areas where there is a lot of dirt eg under the house and under trees - especially where your pets sleep. If you have a house on stumps, it's a good idea to fence off underneath so your pet cannot access this area.



Why are there different sized fleas?

The tiny fleas are newly emerged fleas. The bigger fleas are adults and may be fully fed.

What do the flea eggs look like?

Flea eggs look like specks of salt. You can see them clearly on the coat. This is why you will sometimes hear people saying pets that are not on flea control are like 'salt and pepper' shakers (pepper being the faeces fleas leave behind on your pet). As the pet moves, it shakes flea eggs and faeces into the environment.

I didn't have any fleas in winter but all of sudden I have a plague!

Fleas are clever. They can lay dormant in your environment for up to 6 months just waiting for the weather conditions to be right. As soon as the weather warms up they all hatch, looking for a blood meal.

The fleas are on my pet's bed. How do I get rid of them?

Wash your pets bedding in hot water then lay it out to dry in the midday sun. Larvae cannot survive in direct sunlight.

How do I get rid of fleas in the house?

Vacuum, vacuum, vacuum! You could also use a flea bomb (although not very effective as they cannot go around corners or under furniture) or have your environment sprayed by a licensed pest control operator.

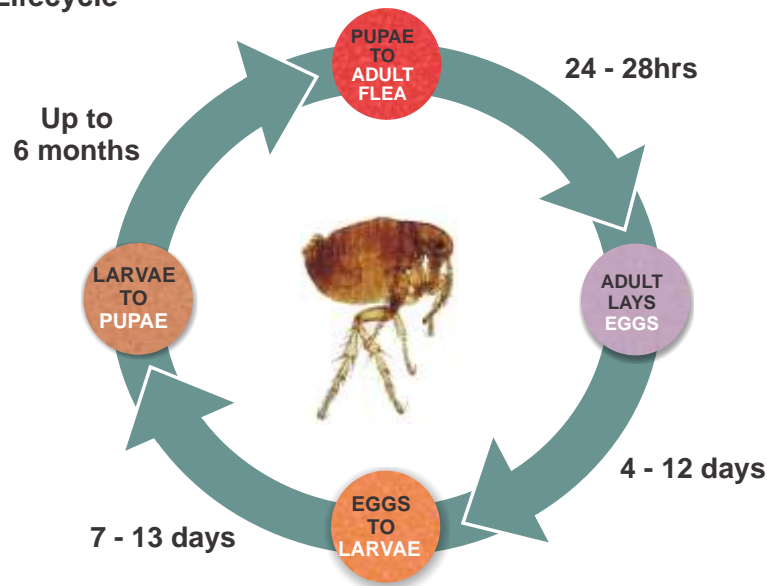
My pet lost a patch of hair where I applied the flea control product.

This is a common side effect of topical flea control products. The hair will grow back.

Can I use these products on puppies?

Yes, but check with us at the practice first as the ages vary from product to product when it is safe to use.

The Flea Lifecycle



The flea cycle depends on the weather conditions. Fleas can complete the whole life cycle in as little as 2 weeks or it can take several months.



In Short

Fleas can cause a serious amount of discomfort for your pet.

They spread other parasites like Tapeworm to dogs and cats and diseases like Haemobartonella to cats.

Fleas also cause flea allergy dermatitis and in general can make your pets life miserable.

Flea control should be used all year round to prevent infestation and only a good quality product should be used.

Always read the labels and never use dog products on your cat as some products can cause death in cats.

Keep pets bedding clean and dry in direct sunlight after washing.

If you have any further questions about fleas or flea control products, don't hesitate to contact the practice. Our staff are experienced in flea prevention and are happy to address any of your concerns.