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FLEAS



Public Health

★ The Circus You Don't Enjoy ★

The Flea's Story

Fleas are small, wingless insects that live on the blood of pets, rodents and, sometimes, you. The most common type of pest flea is the **cat flea (*Ctenocephalides felis*)**. Unlike most fleas, it lives on the host animal where it feeds, mates and lays eggs. The eggs, once laid, fall off the host and end up where the host sleeps or spends most of its time. In about two to five days when the eggs hatch, little worm-like larvae feed on waste from adult fleas and dried blood.

The larvae only grow where they are protected and where there is at least 75 percent relative humidity. After eight to 15 days of feeding and crawling around, they build small, silken cocoons in which they develop into adults. The cocoons are often hidden by dirt and pet hair. At room temperature, this entire cycle takes about 18 days, but the flea can stay in its cocoon for up to a year if the temperature is too cold.

Once the adult flea comes out of the cocoon, it only has about a week to find food (blood). Fleas inside their cocoons sense the presence of a host by vibrations, noise and carbon dioxide before they come out. That is why people coming back from vacation or just moving in find sometimes themselves with a large flea infestation; the adult fleas inside the cocoons have been waiting for something to feed on. Once they feed, they can manage for up to two years before needing another meal.

Since they are so small, even adult fleas can be difficult to see. A fully grown flea is 1/12 to 1/8 inches long and is dark reddish brown to black. Fleas are very good jumpers, able to leap 8 inches high and 16 inches long. Their bodies are very thin from side to side, which allows them to move easily through hair.

Fleas more serious consequences than just making you and your pets itchy. Fleas spread many diseases. One of the worst disasters in human history, the Black Death or plague, was caused by fleas. That disease, and others like typhus, still exist. People who accidentally swallow an infected flea can even get tapeworms.

Treating Fleas

Integrated Pest Management (IPM) is an important strategy when dealing with fleas, because one single method of treatment will only kill fleas at one stage of their lives. If you kill all the adults, you still have cocoons, larvae and eggs to deal with, which can re-infest your home quickly. The key to treating fleas is to first focus on the pet, then on the areas where the pet spends its time.

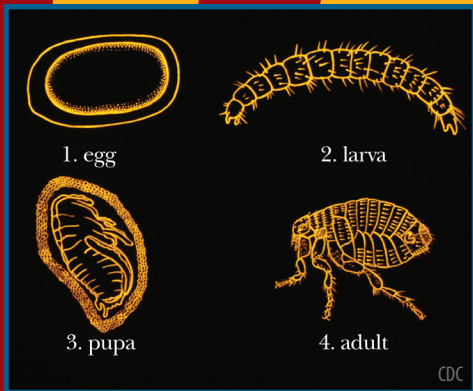
Veterinarians often have the best flea control solutions. It is highly recommended that you ask your vet for flea control products and ideas. They can provide drugs that kill fleas when they bite your pet. They may also affect female fleas so the offspring they produce can't grow into adult fleas.

There are a variety of over the counter products available, but it is important to understand that the safety and effectiveness of the products can vary widely. Make sure you carefully follow all of the instructions on the product.

Since fleas don't live on their hosts before becoming adults, it's very important that you treat the areas where your pets spend



Cat Flea
Ctenocephalides felis



most of their time. One of the best ways to do this is by vigorously vacuuming your entire residence every week, paying close attention to pet sleeping areas, and places where the pets spend most of their time. Once the vacuuming is done, put the vacuum bag in a plastic bag and close it off tightly because fleas can get out of the bag and re-infest your home.

If the flea infestation is minor, thorough vacuuming might do the job, as long as it is done every other day for 10-14 days (you'll want to pick up any larvae that have hatched). If the infestation is heavy, you might want to look at some chemical treatments in addition to the vacuuming. Sprays should be applied to carpeting, cracks and crevices where the fleas might be hiding. You should re-spray those areas after 10 to 14 days to kill anything that has hatched. Using a product that contains an insect growth regulator, in addition to an insecticide spray, has been shown to be even more effective.

If you don't want to spray, you can hire a professional exterminator. Just remember, the exterminator won't treat your pet, so you'll still be responsible for that, and the exterminator will probably ask you to clean pet bedding and your carpets before they spray.

Chemicals should only be used when the infestation is heavy. Chemicals can be dangerous for children and pets so they should be clearly labeled and kept in secure places. All directions should be followed. Remember, more is not necessarily better; use the least amount of chemicals that will do the job.

Fleas can be successfully treated. It can be a job, but you and your pets will appreciate it.

★ HANDLING A FLEA EMERGENCY ★

If your home is heavily infested with fleas, take these steps to get the situation under control.

Inside the Home

1. Locate heavily infested areas, and concentrate efforts on these areas.
2. Wash throw rugs and the pet's bedding.
3. Vacuum upholstered furniture. Remove and vacuum beneath cushions and in cracks and crevices.
4. Vacuum carpets, especially beneath furniture and in areas that pests frequent. Use a hand sprayer to treat all carpets with an insecticide that contains an insect growth regulator.
5. Allow carpets to dry and then vacuum a second time to remove additional fleas the spray caused to emerge.
6. Continue to vacuum for 10 days to 2 weeks to kill adult fleas that continue to emerge from pupal cocoons.

On the pet

1. Use a spot-on or a systemic oral treatment, which you can purchase from a veterinarian or online.

Outside the Home

1. If you treat your pets with spot-on or oral treatments, you'll rarely need to spray outdoors.

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