



The infallible flea

Fleas are the most common pests on our pets. The immature stages (larvae, pupae) can survive for a long time in crevices, sofas, dog beds and carpets, just waiting for the right circumstances (e.g. heat, humidity) to hatch and cause mayhem. Then they not only irritate our pets but can also cause discomfort in humans. Many people will tell you that getting rid of a flea infestation in your home can be quite difficult and costly.

A little on the life-cycle of the flea:

The eggs are often laid on the animal but because the eggs are not sticky, they fall off into the environment. Along with the eggs, the female flea deposits a large amount of faeces as well (often called flea dirt) – this looks like little black grains of sand on your pet. The female flea can lay up to 30-50 eggs in a day! Two days after the egg is laid it hatches if the conditions are right. Do not make the mistake of thinking that fleas only hatch during summer. If your pet sleeps at all indoors during winter, your heater or under floor heating will provide the ideal conditions for eggs to hatch.

The larvae that hatch from the eggs then start to feed on the flea dirt left by the female. After a few days the larva then starts spinning a cocoon and is called a pupa. These can be found in little dark corners e.g. carpets, your dog's bed or your bed... In a week the pupa develops into an adult and emerges from the cocoon. The entire life-cycle takes about 15 days, but the pupa can remain dormant under inhospitable conditions (cold) and extend the life-cycle to over a year!

How do you know your pet has fleas?

Flea bites themselves may be unnoticeable on some pets, cause mild irritation in others or

produce severe itching, red lesions, hair loss and even ulcers in others. The severe lesions are caused by a hypersensitivity to the flea saliva and are called flea bite dermatitis. Large numbers of fleas can cause anaemia (blood loss) in small puppies and kittens and if severe enough it can be fatal.

The most common way of diagnosing a flea infestation is by seeing the adult flea or flea dirt on your pet, especially in the hair around the hind quarters. Pets are also generally quite itchy. If you are unsure, your vet will gladly help you make the diagnosis – it is not always as easy as it sounds.

My pet has fleas, now what?

There are a multitude of products available to control fleas; these include dips, sprays, powders and shampoos etc. The most effective flea control products are however exclusively available from vets. Most of the supermarket products only kill the adult stages or, at most, two of the life-cycle stages. The veterinary recommended products should kill ALL stages of the flea on your pet. They are also much easier to use and usually come in a spot-on form where the product is applied on the coat between the shoulder blades. This is especially helpful in our difficult kittys. Remember that powders are not suitable for cats because they groom themselves by constantly licking. These products also have a wide safety margin and most of them can be used on pregnant bitches and queens and even in puppies and kittens of three days old. Pets should be treated at least once a month for a minimum of three months in order to kill all the eggs, larvae and pupa in the environment, preventing them to grow into adult fleas and again jump onto your pet. Usually by the third month the life-cycle should be broken. This may not be true in heavy infestations and some pets may need year long treatment. In such a case treatment of the environment is also very important. Ask your vet which products are safe for this – keeping in mind that fumigating your home is also hazardous to your pet's health.

Other medications such as tablets will also aid in the control of an infestation. Most of these will be available from your vet, but note, they only work when used in combination with a spot-on or another whole body treatment. Your vet will explain how they are best

used in combination.

In cases of flea bite dermatitis your vet will also most likely prescribe an antibiotic, shampoo and perhaps a treatment to control your pet's itching. This condition is very common and can be caused by the bite of just one flea! Flea control in these pets is even more important as the disease can have a lengthy recovery period. Many other skin diseases can have similar symptoms and it is therefore important to have a vet diagnose the problem, if you are unsure.

Also take note that fleas carry tapeworms and that your pet could become infected by ingesting the flea – when grooming or licking themselves. For this reason deworming is recommended whenever we treat for fleas.

By following the above protocol you will most likely succeed in keeping your pet flea free. Prevention is cheaper and more effective than treating a flea ridden pet. You will also be much happier with the thought of NOT having something called “flea-dirt” in your bed...