

Fleas

Whilst it can be embarrassing to find that your pet has fleas, they are very common, and are the cause of the vast majority of skin problems. The good news is that there are plenty of effective flea treatments for your pet and your home.

A flea is small, dark brown, flattened from side to side and has the ability to jump huge distances. This means that only a few moments of contact with an infested animal can lead to problems for you and your pet. If left unchecked, a flea infestation can cause:

- constant irritation
- open wounds from severe scratching
- infection of the resulting sores
- patches of wet excema
- allergic reaction triggered by the injection of flea saliva
- widespread skin inflammation
- hair loss
- transmission of tapeworm, who use the flea as a secondary host
- multiplication of fleas within the household

How will I know if my pet has fleas?

Even in the early stages, a flea infestation is usually easily diagnosed. The most common feeding grounds are the base of the tail, the lower back, the inner hind legs and the abdomen, whilst rabbit fleas prefer the ear margins.

Fleas may be difficult to spot amongst your pet's fur, but the droppings are easy to find - small black specks containing semi-digested blood. Combing or parting of the fur will reveal the gritty droppings which, when dropped onto damp white paper, leave a characteristic red halo as blood leaches out. Such droppings are a clear indication of flea infestation.

Flea bites in humans are usually seen on the lower legs and trunk as small raised reddened areas which are intensely itchy. Unfortunately, fleas will happily feed on any nearby warm-blooded animal, including us.

A female flea will begin laying eggs 2-3 days after her first meal, and may lay up to 600 in her lifetime. The complete life cycle can, in ideal conditions, be as short as three weeks. The adult female flea lays small white eggs around the areas where the host spends most time - a favourite corner of the carpet, the pet's bed etc.

Within a few days, the egg hatches into an active larva that feeds on the partially digested blood in the droppings left by adult fleas. After two weeks, the larva weaves a sticky cocoon that picks up carpet fibres and other debris, providing effective camouflage. The adult flea usually emerges after a further two weeks, but can remain as a pupa for up to two years. It is the vibration, warmth and increased humidity caused by the presence of a dog, cat or human which stimulates the adult flea to emerge from the cocoon.



Treating an infestation of fleas

Our centrally heated homes create an ideal environment for fleas throughout the year.

Fitted carpets, particularly those with a long pile, provide good protection for eggs, larvae and pupae. At any one time, less than 1% of a flea population is at the adult biting stage living on the host - the remaining 99% are found in the environment.

Therefore, it is impossible to control a flea infestation unless the home environment is treated at the same time as all pets.

Treating the environment

As fleas, eggs and larvae are easily transferred from room to room on footwear and clothing, it is necessary to treat the whole house, not just those areas to which pets are allowed access. If your pets travel by car, this will also need treatment.

In order to stimulate the highly resistant pupae to hatch, try to raise the ambient temperature to around 25°C and boil a kettle until the air feels a little muggy. Following directions carefully, treat the area using a spray designed specifically for household use. The newer ones contain not only an insecticide to kill all adult fleas, but also an insect growth regulator which prevents the immature forms from developing into adults. Then thoroughly clean each room using the fine nozzle of a vacuum cleaner and paying special attention to the edges of fitted carpets, beneath rugs, pet bedding, upholstery and any warm, dark places. Remove the contents of the dust bag from the house and burn.

After a thorough airing, the room is then safe to use and provided that all pets are treated regularly to prevent the re-introduction of fleas, protection will be maintained for several months. An extra treatment before going on holiday is also a good idea.

Treating your pet

Many different types of products are available to control fleas. Sprays, shampoos, and spot-on preparations are all effective when used properly and consistently. Always follow instructions carefully though, as using too often, or too soon between treatments may lead to the build up of toxic levels of chemicals that could harm your pet.

An oral preparation is also available, given once a month to cats and dogs or as a twice yearly injection for cats. These are safe and effective at every age, including pregnant animals or those receiving medical treatment.

Find a product that you and your pets are happy with, and use it regularly to prevent re-infestation.

Our staff can advise on all the various types available, and answer any questions you may have, on 01435 864422

