

Tips for Year-Round Flea Prevention

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Fighting fleas doesn't have to be a headache. By taking a few simple preventative steps, you can protect your pet from these blood sucking parasites.

Even if your pet never steps one paw outside, they're still at risk for flea infestation. Fleas can enter homes through cracks, crevices, screen doors, even by hitching a ride on our clothes. In the U.S. the flea species causing the biggest problem is the "Cat Flea." Despite its name, these tiny black insects attack cats as well as dogs and people.

Throughout most of the country, fleas flourish during the summer months. Although in some warmer regions of the country owners battle the bugs all year long.

Signs your pet might be infected include scratchy

skin, or white rice-like pieces (tapeworm) in his feces. Check for the parasites by parting the fur around your dog's tail base, or near your cat's ears and neck. If you see black wingless insects, or "flea dirt" (dark specs of dried blood) on the skin, your pet has fleas.

Itchy skin is only a mild problem associated with this pesky parasite. Some animals are allergic to flea saliva, and as a result, develop painful skin infections secondary to the scratching, says Susan Nelson, DVM, and assistant professor at Kansas State University's College of Veterinary Medicine in Manhattan.

Plus, fleas can carry tapeworm eggs. So if a pet ingests a flea while licking herself, she might become infected with tapeworms -- long, flat worms that live in the digestive track.

That's why it's important to stop fleas before they start to bite. The best way is by applying a monthly spot-on product. Liquid flea control treatments are applied directly on your pet's skin, in-between the shoulder blades. These products are quick, easy, and safe.

Products like flea collars and shampoos are not as effective at fighting fleas, warns Nelson. And natural remedies that supposedly repel fleas - such as garlic, brewers yeast, and B-complex vitamins - don't work, veterinarians say.

Before using any flea control product owners should carefully read the label instructions, says Kim LoGuidice, DVM and head of the ER department at Veterinary Specialty Hospital of the Carolinas in Cary, North Carolina. And, she warns, never to apply a canine flea product on cats. Doing so might trigger a toxic reaction in felines that requires emergency medical attention.

Other ways to keep your pet flea-free year round include:

- Vacuum carpets at least once a week, concentrating in areas where pets spend a lot of time.
- Wash dog and cat bedding weekly in hot water. Don't forget to include other materials your pet sleeps on such as blankets or throw rugs.
- Spray the yard with an insecticide, or for a more environmentally friendly approach, apply nematodes to problem areas. Nematodes are microscopic worms that kill flea larvae and cocoons.
- Hire a professional exterminator to treat a rental home or apartment before you move in, especially if the previous owner had pets. Or, look for do-it-yourself options such as foggers and sprays designed to kill adult fleas and stop the development of eggs.

It doesn't take much effort to protect your pet against fleas. Just apply a year round flea control treatment on your pets and take extra care to clean your home. Your pooch and kitty will thank you for it!