

# Flea Control Strategies

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## Did you know...

- Fleas spend only 10% of their time on your animal
- An average fleas' life span can be up to 2-3 years
- One female flea can lay up to 1 million eggs during its life
- Eggs can live unhatched in your carpet for a year until the right environment for hatching occurs
- Bark dust, wood piles and ivy are great places for fleas to survive the winter months
- The flea is the second oldest insect (the cockroach is the first) because of its excellent survival mechanisms

## The Flea Life Cycle

Adult cat and dog fleas prefer to feed on pets rather than people. The pets are closer to the ground and have warmer body temperatures than humans. Second choice would be children -- especially infants and toddlers. Female fleas will probe and bite and average of seven times in a "grouping" before locating a blood vessel in the skin. The saliva they leave with each bite can cause a localized allergic reaction (flea allergy dermatitis or FAD) After feeding on large amounts of blood, the female flea deposits her eggs and droppings (flea dirt) which consists mostly of undigested blood. Both the eggs (which are white and about the size of a grain of salt) and the droppings

(which are black and appear like ground pepper, often in the shape of a comma) drop off the animal's coat and spread all over the environment.

Here's a quick home-test to see if your pet has fleas: Lay out a white piece of butcher paper and groom your pet for a few minutes as they stand on the paper. Do you see any black, comma-looking things against the white paper? If so, put a drop of water on it. If it's flea dirt, the water will turn pink.

Flea eggs remain in the environment for variable amounts of time and are not destroyed by extremes in temperature or by pesticides. When proper conditions exist, the eggs hatch and release tiny white larvae. These larvae are not able to get around and must rely on the undigested blood left in the droppings for their food source. Larvae are very susceptible to extremes in environment, pesticides, and insect growth regulators.

Within several days the larvae spin a protective cocoon called a pupae around themselves. The pupae are very resistant to all but steam cleaning and can lie dormant for many months to years. The pupae is the primary stage that over-winters in the environment. When conditions are favorable (warm and moist), the

pupae release young adult fleas and the cycle is complete.

The length of the flea life cycle can vary from a little as one month to as long as two or three years.

## Flea Control Products

There are many products available to eliminate fleas. They differ in effectiveness, application, safety, convenience, odour of the product, and duration of effectiveness. Sounds pretty complicated, right? It is. It's actually a chemical nightmare.

**AN EFFECTIVE FLEA CONTROL PROGRAM MUST INCLUDE ALL ANIMALS IN THE HOUSEHOLD AND THE ENTIRE ENVIRONMENT IN WHICH THE ANIMALS LIVE (INCLUDING YOUR CAR.)**

Many people only use one product at a time, which is NOT effective. You must treat the animal, the house, and the yard all at one time to get this challenge under control.

Control of fleas on the pet: You have your choice of powders, sprays, dips, spot-ons or oral growth regulators.

Flea Powder: Manufacturers of these products say flea powder is safe to use every 3-4 days on dogs and cats older

than 8 weeks of age. The active ingredient takes about 15 minutes to kill fleas when first applied. By the end of 5-7 days, if not reapplied, flea powder works only as a residual, taking up to 12 hours to kill the flea. There is no growth regulator in this product so it only kills the adults.

Note: Powder should be diluted to half strength with talcum powder when used on puppies and kittens.

Disadvantages of flea powder: Flea powder can make the coat feel rough and dirty. So, if your pet is already uncomfortable from the fleas and now you are alienating them by not giving them the affection you used to when their coats were cleaner and softer, this makes the problem worse. The animals do not enjoy flea powder and it may make asthma worse.

Flea Sprays: Sprays can vary somewhat. Most are alcohol-based and some are more organic than others. The alcohol is for quick kill of the adult and pre-adult stages. Some flea sprays contain an insect growth regulator that will kill flea eggs as well. Make sure you get one with this in it. Pets run when they see you come to them with that bottle after a few applications.

So, could you use rubbing alcohol or vodka to kill the adults? Yes, but using rubbing alcohol can be toxic. Rubbing alcohol contains a bit of methanol, which can cause blindness when ingested. Cats groom themselves and will ingest this. Aromatherapy: Herbal insecticides include pennyroyal (very toxic), clove, citronella, and eucalyptus oils (diluted of course.) These can be mixed in with shampoos or applied to a material flea collar. They can be very irritating when applied directly to the skin. They should not be put directly onto the coat either because when the animal grooms himself or herself they will ingest it. In general, pets hate this type of flea control and only submit to it in a learned helplessness type of situation.

Flea collars are only minimally effective in the control of fleas. Most collars contain dichlorvos, which is released as a vapor. They are sold under several trade names. Dichlorvos is toxic to animals and people and can cause severe reactions occasionally. Remember, flea and tick collars don't work well for animals over 9 kilograms.

Note: Collars are especially harmful to Persian cats. They may also cause local-

ized reactions around the neck.

Ultrasonic collars are ineffective and may cause hearing loss in your pet. Ultrasonic collars are an expensive gimmick. Don't fall for this.

Dips which kill fleas and mites for several days or weeks are highly toxic and should not be used for routine flea control.

One study found that more than 3 dips per year led to an increased incidence of cancer. Wear gloves if you decide on this method of flea control. Try to pick a non-organophosphate (OGP) type with a growth inhibitor in it.

Pour-on and Spot-on products containing organophosphates are also very toxic. Organophosphate spot-on kills the fleas only after it bites the pet and sucks its blood. These products are also dangerous where infants are concerned. Do not let a small child be exposed to the pet for at least 24 hours after these products are used. I have heard of instances where the parent found a dead infant the day after putting this on the family dog that slept with the child. They are applied once every two weeks. A good rule of thumb is "if a little is good, a lot is NOT necessarily better." Use only the dose specified on the bottle. Make sure you know the weight of the animal before you dose them. Make note of the next paragraph.

Common side effects to flea products may include hypersalivation, vomiting, and diarrhea. Some animals appear to foam at the mouth, others stagger about. Their pupils dilate and they seem disoriented. The best treatment is to remove the product from the animal's skin or body. Bathe your pet immediately--with a mild shampoo NOT containing flea control. Some animals may need to be treated by a veterinarian with atropine or steroids to help the animal deal with the toxicity and in some instances to save their lives. If you have any questions, do not hesitate to call your vet.

#### **Treating the Pet's Environment:**

In general, the products used in the environment can be more toxic and last longer than those which are applied to the animal. Never use these products directly on your pet or children unless the bottle states it is safe to do so (even then, I would question this.)

Where young children and infants are concerned, more importance is placed on safety than effectiveness. This is why it is important for you to be involved in the choices of products for your home and pets.

Premise control products kill only the susceptible stages of the fleas at the point in time they are used. They are fairly safe and can be used as the main environmental treatment in homes that have birds and fishes as pets. The frequency of fogging and spraying depends upon the temperature and humidity, degree of flea infestation, the traffic of pets in and out, the effectiveness of the products used, and the amount of household clutter in which fleas can hide.

Foggers are designed to cover large enclosed areas and are set off while all occupants (including pets) are away. They are most effective in empty spaces and in crawl spaces. In homes with furniture or items covering the floor they are not very effective. Foggers can take care of up to 80% of the problem. Make sure you get one with a growth inhibitor in it. When using foggers, remove all living things from the premises. Cover your fish tanks and remove all the birds. Read labels prior to using any foggers or premise sprays.

Yard and kennel sprays are for outdoor use and should be used in accordance with manufacturer recommendations. Most fleas live within a 9 metre radius of the building -- where most pets spend their time. These sprays can be purchased at your veterinarian's office, pet shops, on-line, or at the local garden store.

Housekeeping can be an extremely effective flea control measure. Vacuuming will remove flea eggs, pupae and the flea droppings used by the larvae for food. Vacuum up some flea powder or add a piece of flea collar to each new bag or burn the vacuum sweepings to prevent fleas from completing their life cycle in the compost heap or trash bag. Vacuuming EVERY DAY is essential if you don't want to use chemicals. Also, getting rid of carpet in your house helps a lot. I would also recommend an occasional shampoo of the carpets (not dry-chemical cleaning) as it will suffocate the cocoons.

Mopping with soap and mild bleach water is quite effective for flea control in those houses with no carpets.

Well, I hope this helps your flea problem. Good luck! You'll need it.

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