



VETERINARY HOSPITAL & HOTEL

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## Flea Control for Cats

Successful flea control has two aspects. Fleas must be controlled on your cat, and fleas must be controlled in your cat's environment. Since cats and dogs share the same fleas, the presence of a dog in your cat's environment makes flea control much more difficult.

### Diagnosis of Flea Infestation

When a cat is heavily infested with fleas, it is easy to find them. A flea comb can be used on the belly and at the base of the tail. Be sure to part the hair and look at the level of the skin. When the numbers are very small, look for "flea dirt." Flea dirt is digested blood left behind by the fleas. Flea dirt is actually fecal matter from the flea. Finding flea dirt is a sure indication that fleas are present or have been present recently. In fact, flea dirt is usually much easier to find than adult fleas.

Flea dirt looks like pepper. It varies from tiny black dots to tubular structures. If you are in doubt of its identification, put the suspected material on a light colored tabletop or counter top. Add one or two drops of water, and wait about 30 seconds. If it is flea dirt, the water will turn reddish brown. Another trick is to put some of the material on a white paper towel and then wet the paper towel with water. A red stain will become apparent if you gently wipe the material across the surface of the paper towel. Flea dirt will bubble if a drop of hydrogen peroxide is placed on top of it.

Contrary to popular belief, most cats have rather limited itching due to fleabites. However, many cats become allergic to saliva in the flea's mouth. When these cats are bitten, intense itching occurs, causing the cat to scratch and chew on it's skin. In these cats, only one bite can cause an intense itching reaction. It can lead to sores and hair loss.

### The Flea's Life Cycle

To appreciate the complex issue of flea control, you must understand something about the flea's life cycle.

Although you are only able to see the adult flea, there are actually 4 stages of the life cycle.

Flea *eggs* are too small to see without magnification. Fleas lay their eggs on the cat, but the eggs do not stick to the cat's hair. Instead, they fall off into the cat's environment.

Flea *larvae* feed on organic debris found in their environment and on adult flea feces, which is essential for successful development. They avoid direct sunlight and actively move deep into carpet fibers, furniture cushions, crack in wood floors or along baseboards, or under organic debris (grass, branches, leaves, or soil.)

Following complete development, the mature larvae produce a silk-like cocoon in which the next step of development, the *pupa*, resides. The cocoon is sticky, so it quickly becomes coated with debris from the environment. This serves to camouflage it. However, the adults do not emerge from the cocoon unless stimulated by physical pressure, carbon dioxide (exhaled gas from pets or people), or heat.

When the *adult* flea emerges from its cocoon, it immediately seeks a host because it must have a blood meal within a few days to survive. It is attracted to people and pets by body heat, movement, and exhaled carbon dioxide. It seeks light, which means that it migrates to the surface of the carpet so that it can encounter a passing host.

This entire life cycle (adult flea --> egg --> larvae --> pupa --> adult) can be completed in 14-21 days with the proper temperature and humidity conditions. This adds to the problem of flea control. Female can lay eggs for up to 100 days, which means that a single flea can produce *thousands* of eggs.

If untreated, the female flea will continue to take blood for several weeks. During that time, she will consume about 15 times her body weight in blood. Although the male fleas do not take as much blood, they, too, contribute to significant blood loss. This can lead to the cat having an insufficient number of red blood cells, which is known as anemia. In young or debilitated cats, the anemia may be severe enough to cause death.

### **Flea Control on your Cat/Kitten**

Successful flea control must rid the cat of fleas and it must rid the cat's environment of fleas. In fact, environmental control is as important as treatment of the cat. If your cat remains indoors and you do not have other pets that come in from the outside, environmental control is relatively easy, especially with the advent of the new topical products (see below). However, the cat that goes outdoors or stays outdoors presents a somewhat greater challenge and a few fleas may occasionally be seen indoors.

Many of the older insecticides (which have been the mainstay of flea control for years) have limited effectiveness against fleas because they are only effective for a few hours after application on the cat. Also, these are primarily geared to kill adult fleas. **Never use a spray, foam, or dip on any cat.** These products will be ingested during grooming and can cause toxicity. Flea powders, sprays, and shampoos will kill the fleas present on your cat at the time of application. However, most of these products have little or no residual effects, so the fleas that return to your cat from his environment are not affected. Thus, your cat may be covered with fleas within a day after having a flea bath or being sprayed or powdered. Flea collars aren't very effective either and can be very toxic to your cat.

Three relatively new products have come onto the market in the last couple of years. These new topical treatments are applied to the nape of the neck. They are Advantage, Frontline Top Spot, and Revolution. All are safe and very effective. Be wary of topical treatments sold anywhere except through your veterinarian. Many of these are still insecticides and can be every bit as toxic as the older flea products.

In kittens younger than 6-8 weeks old, a flea powder or shampoo is ideal. There is an insecticide called pyrethrin that is safer than others and it should be listed as the active ingredient on these products. If in doubt, ask your veterinarian. A flea comb is also very effective on young kittens to remove both the adults and the flea dirt. Use alcohol to kill the fleas that are removed and wash them down the drain.

### **Environmental Control**

*Effective flea control must include treating the environment also.*

**House.** Even though fleas may be in your house, most people never see them. Vacuuming the entire premise including under the furniture, along the baseboards, and even the furniture, can greatly reduce the numbers of eggs. Be sure to throw away the vacuum bag immediately in an outside garbage container, away from the house. Wash all bedding or blankets that you can and mop the hard flooring in your house. Being diligent and thorough is the key to effective flea control.

A professional exterminator may be called to treat your house or you may use a **combination** house fogger and a long-lasting spray. These foggers and sprays are very effective for adult fleas, but they will not kill adults that are still in the cocoon. You should purchase a fogger and spray that kills the adult fleas and inhibits development of the eggs and larvae. *A second treatment is needed about 2 weeks after the first to get fleas that have hatched from the cocoons.* It is important to note that foggers work best if used in large, open areas. They are released into the air and settle at ground level, but do not effectively get under furniture, furniture cushions, around corners, behind drapes, and in closets. Thus, you must *always* use a spray to get these areas where the immature fleas are generally in abundance.

**Yard.** A professional exterminator may also do yard control with various insecticides or you may use some yourself. Be sure that any insecticide that you use has a 30-day residual. This keeps you from having to spray every week. In climates with extended warm temperatures and high humidity, it will often be necessary to treat monthly during the warm months of the year. You should use a 30-day residual product each time. Your veterinarian is able to help you choose the most effective product for your situation.