

Fleas and Your Pet

General Information

Fleas are small, dark brown, wingless insects with flattened bodies. Several types of fleas infest the hair coat of animals, and some occasionally feed on people. These blood-sucking insects cause considerable irritation and distress to infected pets. Severe infestation may lead to anemia from blood loss. Fleas spread the common dog and cat tapeworm. Flea bites also cause skin allergies, rashes and sores on pets and possibly their owners.

The best place to look for fleas on your pet are the hindquarters, base of the tail, stomach and groin regions. Sometimes no fleas are found but only tiny, black granules that resemble ground black pepper. This material is flea feces and consists of digested blood. To distinguish this material from dirt, smudge it on white paper or add a drop of water to it. If you see a reddish-brown color, your pet has fleas.

Life Cycle

The average female flea will initiate feeding within seconds of acquiring your pet, will mate within eight to twenty-four hours, and begin laying eggs within twenty-four to thirty-six hours of her first blood meal. At peak production, she can lay forty to fifty eggs per day. She can lay eggs for over 100 days and produce, on average, 20,000 eggs. As your pet moves around the house scratching and digging at itself, flea eggs drop off and are spread throughout the environment. Eggs hatch after two to twelve days into larvae that feed in the environment. Larvae molt twice within two to two hundred days, and the older larvae spin a cocoon in which they remain for one week to one year. A hungry adult flea emerges from the cocoon. The long period during which the larvae remain in the cocoon explains why fleas are difficult to eradicate from the environment.

Flea Control

Many different products are available for flea control. Please consult with your veterinarian for specific advice on which products to use. To eradicate fleas, you must apply an insecticide correctly and at the proper dose and interval. All pets and the pet's environment must be treated to eradicate fleas. Severe home and yard infestations may require treatment by a professional exterminator.