



External Parasites



At some point in their lives, many pets experience discomfort caused by fleas and ticks. These parasites can be extremely irritating to pets and can cause serious skin problems or even carry disease. Modern medicines make treatment, control, and prevention of many external parasites much easier than in the past.

Fleas

Flea Basics

Fleas thrive when the weather is warm and humid. Depending on your climate, fleas may be a seasonal or year-round problem. Your pet can pick up fleas wherever an infestation exists, often in areas frequented by other cats and dogs. Adult fleas are dark brown, no bigger than a sesame seed, and able to move rapidly over your pet's skin.

Once the flea becomes an adult, it spends virtually all of its time on your pet. Female fleas begin laying eggs within 24 hours of selecting your pet as a host, producing up to 50 eggs each day. These eggs fall from your pet onto the floor or furniture, including your pet's bed, or onto any other indoor or outdoor area where your pet happens to go. Tiny, worm-like larvae hatch from the eggs and burrow into carpets, under furniture, or

into soil before spinning a cocoon. The cocooned flea pupae can lie dormant (inactive) for weeks before emerging as adults that are ready to infest (or re-infest) your pet. The result is a flea life cycle of anywhere from 12 days to 6 months, depending on environmental factors such as temperature and humidity.

Diagnosis, Risks and Consequences

You may not know that your pet has fleas until their number increases to the point that your pet is obviously uncomfortable. Signs of flea problems range from mild redness to severe scratching that can lead to open sores and skin infections (“hot spots”). One of the first things you may notice on a pet with fleas is “flea dirt”—the black flea droppings left on your pet’s coat. You may not actually see the fleas themselves, but they can still be on your pet and in the environment.

Fleas bite animals and suck their blood; young or small pets with heavy flea infestations may become anemic. Some pets can develop an allergy to flea saliva that may result in more severe irritation and scratching; these pets can become severely itchy from just one or two flea bites. Also, pets can become infected with certain types of tapeworms if they ingest fleas carrying tapeworm eggs (a pet using its teeth to scratch the flea bites often eats the fleas). In areas with moderate to severe flea infestations, people may also be bitten by fleas. While fleas are capable of transmitting several infectious diseases to pets and people, this is rare.

Treatment and Control

Pets at risk for fleas should be treated during the flea season with an appropriate preventive. Your veterinarian can recommend a product most suitable for your pet. Because much of the flea’s life cycle is spent off of your pet, treating only your pet will not eliminate the problem. If you kill the adult fleas and do not kill the eggs, larvae and pupae, your pet will become re-infested when these fleas become adults and the cycle will start all over again. Therefore, in addition to treating your pet, reduce the flea population in your house by thoroughly cleaning your pet’s sleeping quarters and vacuuming floors and furniture that your pet comes in contact with frequently. Careful and regular vacuuming/cleaning of the pet’s living area helps to remove and kill flea eggs, larvae, and pupae. You may be advised to treat your house with insecticides to kill the fleas; consult with your veterinarian about products safe for use around pets and children. Flea larvae are more resistant than adult fleas to insecticides. With moderate and severe flea infestations, you may also be advised to treat your yard. Your veterinarian can recommend an appropriate course of action and suggest ways to prevent future flea infestations.

Ticks

Tick Basics

Ticks are commonly found in wooded areas, brush, shrubs and wild undergrowth, and any animal (or human, for that matter) that enters these environments is at risk of becoming a tick's host. Immature ticks often feed on small, wild animals found in forests, prairies, and brush. Adult ticks seek larger hosts like dogs and cats which venture into these habitats. Tick exposure may be seasonal, depending on geographic location. There are many different species of ticks that can affect dogs and cats.

Diagnosis, Risks and Consequences

Ticks are most often found around your dog's neck, in the ears, in the folds between the legs and the body, and between the toes, but they can be found anywhere on the body and are usually easily seen or felt. Cats may have ticks on their neck or face. Tick bites can cause skin irritation and heavy infestations can cause anemia in pets. An adult female tick can ingest up to 100 times her weight in blood! Ticks are capable of spreading serious infectious diseases (such as Lyme disease, Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever, and others) to the pets and the people on which they feed. They can also cause tick paralysis. Disease risk varies by geographic area and tick species.

Treatment and Control

Prompt removal of ticks is very important because it lessens the chance of disease transmission from the tick to your pet. Remove ticks by carefully using tweezers to firmly grip the tick as close to the pet's skin as possible and gently and steadily pulling the tick free without twisting it or crushing the tick during removal. Crushing, twisting or jerking the tick out of the skin while its head is still buried could result in leaving the tick's mouth parts in your pet's skin; this can cause a reaction and may become infected. After removing the tick, crush it while avoiding contact with tick fluids that can carry disease. Do not attempt to smother the tick with alcohol or petroleum jelly, or apply a hot match to it, as this may cause the tick to regurgitate saliva into the wound and increase the risk of disease if the tick is infected.

Pets at risk for ticks should be treated during the tick season with an appropriate preventive. Your veterinarian can recommend a product best suited to your pet's needs. Owners who take their pets to tick-prone areas during camping, sporting, or hiking trips should examine their pets for ticks immediately upon returning home and remove them from their pets. If your pet picks up ticks in your backyard, trimming bushes and removing brush may reduce your pet's exposure and risk of infestation. And, if you find ticks on your pet, don't forget to check yourself for ticks, too!