

The Secret Lives of Fleas

The weather is getting warmer and increased humidity is on the way... You may not appreciate the return of hot, muggy days, but fleas certainly do. These tiny, blood-sucking insects can be a real nuisance. They can cause anemia, spread disease, encourage tapeworm infections, and create severe skin problems for pets that are allergic to flea bites. Luckily, with some background knowledge of flea patterns and lifecycles, infestation is preventable.



How Fleas Find You

Outside, hungry adult fleas hunt for warm host environments - pets are often the ideal target. Even if your pet doesn't carry fleas inside, your home is not totally immune. Fleas have been known to infiltrate screen windows or ride into homes on people's clothing. Worse, fleas are so tiny they may be hard to notice right away.

How Fleas Spread

About 24 hours after a female flea has fed on pet blood, she will start laying eggs at the rate of 40 per day. She can live for up to six weeks-continuing to lay eggs at this rate. The eggs fall off of pets and land in lawns, carpets, cracks in hardwood floors, upholstery, and pet beds. The eggs hatch and the baby fleas go through their larval stage. If your house or yard is at a comfortable temperature (70 to 90 degrees), this may take as little as nine days.

The larvae soon develop cocoons, which are sticky. They adhere to carpets and nestle in other fibers or crevices. In their protected cocoons, they can live for months while monitoring fluctuations in carbon monoxide levels, light, and movement; this is how they know that dogs or cats are near. As soon as they get the signal, they emerge as hungry adult fleas. This whole cycle can take less than three weeks. With some basic math, it's easy to see how a few fleas can turn into a huge infestation during the course of one summer.

How to Find Fleas

The first key to protecting your pet and your home is vigilance. Know that fleas are small and hard to spot. Sometimes the only sign they're present is the "flea dirt" they leave behind. A flea comb is a great tool to use routinely. Carefully comb your pet's coat, looking for signs of fleas and flea excrement. (Keep in mind, some pets are very adept at grooming-especially if they are itchy and nursing a rash. They may clean away flea evidence before it can be found. Any pet with a skin rash should be seen by a veterinarian.)

How to Control and Prevent Fleas

Many of today's flea control products are very effective. They kill would-be invaders and even sterilize resistant adults, so surviving fleas cannot lay eggs to pass on their strong genes. Using the right product, carefully and routinely, is often enough to prevent flea infestation.

Control products that work the best can fluctuate from year to year, as flea populations change. Your veterinarian will tell you which options are best for your pet. Remember: always consult your veterinarian before trying a flea control product. Some over-the-counter products are actually very toxic and not recommended.