

SOUTH FEDERAL ANIMAL HOSPITAL

Client Education

FLEAS: KNOW YOUR ENEMY

Despite numerous technological advances, fleas continue to represent a potentially lethal plague upon our pets. Current products are effective, so there is little reason for this; the problem seems to be one of understanding.

There are over 1900 flea species in the world. Pet owners are concerned with only one: *Ctenocephalides felis*, the cat flea. This is the flea that we find in our pets (cats, dogs, rabbits, and other species). In 99% of cases and in order to understand how to control the damage caused by this tiny little animal, you should learn all you can about it.

What Kind of damage Can Fleas Cause?

It would be a grave mistake to think of the flea as simply a nuisance. A heavy flea burden is lethal, especially in smaller or younger animals. Conditions brought about by flea infestation include:

- Flea Allergic Dermatitis (fleas do not make animals itchy unless there is a flea allergy).
- Flea Anemia
- Feline Infectious Anemia
- Cat Scratch Fever/Bartollettosis (does not make a cat sick, but people can get sick from it)
- Tapeworms

Myths Veterinarians Hear Every Day

- My pet cannot have fleas because he lives totally indoors (fleas thrive particularly well in the well-regulated temperatures in the home).
- My pet cannot have fleas because if there were any fleas they would be biting me (fleas definitely prefer dog or cat blood, and won't eat human blood unless absolutely necessary. Humans do not tend to get bitten unless the flea populations are high).
- We don't have fleas because we only have ceramic tile (or wooden) floors (fleas love to develop between the cracks of wooden floors, and in people furniture and bedding).
- We cannot have fleas because we would see them (you cannot expect to see fleas because dogs and cats are adept at licking them away. Sometimes all you see is the characteristic skin disease, or the fecal matter of the fleas, known as "flea dirt").

The Flea Life Cycle

- **The Egg:** At any given time about one third of the fleas population in your home is in the egg stage. Adult female fleas lay up to 40 eggs per day. The eggs are laid on the dog or cat, where they fall off to hatch in the environment. Eggs incubate best in high humidity and temperatures of 65 to 80 degrees Fahrenheit.
- **The Larvae:** At any given time 57% of the flea population in the home are in the larval stage.
- **The Pupae:** Only 8% of the larvae make it to the pupal stage, but once they have spun cocoons they are nearly invincible. Inside the cocoon, they pupa is turning into the flea that we are familiar with. They are specially protected under carpet, which is why carpet has developed a reputation as a shelter for fleas. The pupae can remain dormant for many months, waiting for the right time to emerge.
- **The Unfed Adult Flea:** The newly-developed flea can remain in the cocoon until a host is available. When the flea feels the time is right, it emerges hungry and eager to find the new host. A common scenario occurs when a dog is boarded during the owner's vacation. The owner picks up the dog at the kennel and returns home. The unfed fleas have been waiting for a host, and when the dog enters the home, a huge number of fleas at once and attack the dog, creating a sudden, heavy infestation. Often the boarding kennel is blamed for giving the dog fleas.
- **The Fed Flea:** After the adult flea finds a host and takes its first blood meal, metabolic changes occur that alter the flea forever. The flea is now called a fed flea and, if separated from its host, will die in only a few weeks without a blood meal. The female flea begins to lay eggs within 24 to 48 hours of her first blood meal, and will lay eggs continuously until she dies.

The average lifespan of the adult flea is 4 to 6 weeks, depending on the grooming abilities of the host. ON AVERAGE, THE TIME PERIOD FROM EGG TO ADULT FLEA IS ABOUT 3 WEEKS.

What to Do to Avoid Having a Flea Problem:

- If you do not currently have a flea problem, we suggest treating only your pet. There are many efficacious products available to treat your pet, most work very well if used according to directions. Our office will be most happy to inform you on these products and help you choose the one that is best for your pet.
- If you already have a flea problem, you must treat BOTH the pet and the environment. Remember that, for every flea that your dog has, there are hundreds in the environment. We advise you to contract the services of a reputable exterminator to treat your home and yard, as they are best equipped to offer the latest and safest insecticides.

Additional Important Questions

1. Q. Sometimes the fleas on my pet look smaller than average. Are these baby fleas?

- A. No. Remember the flea life cycle. The fleas you see on your pet are adult fleas. They vary in size depending on the nutrients that got in prior development as well as individual genetic make-up.**
- 2. Q. I put the topical product on the dog 3 weeks ago, and now I am seeing fleas. Do I need to put more?**
- A. No. Remember how these products work. In the first 20 days or so, the topicals kill fleas quicker than in the next 10 days. Seeing fleas does not mean the product is not working, it only means that it takes the product a little longer to kill the fleas. However, if you start seeing a LOT of fleas, it may mean that you have an environmental problem, and it may be time to call the exterminator. There are some special circumstances as in pets who suffer from flea allergies, when your veterinarian will advise you to use the product every 2-3 weeks. It is perfectly safe to do this with your veterinarian's supervision.**
- 3. Q. Is it OK to save money by getting a large tube of one of the topical products and dividing them into smaller dose for my pets?**
- A. Not really. Most of these products are insecticides and they may not be used legally in any manner other than the way they are labeled. Special attention should be given to cats, as they may be more susceptible than dogs to insecticides. Our office does not condone off-label use of ANY flea control product.**