

Fleas

Life cycle

Fleas are small wingless insects. Adult fleas are **blood sucking parasites** that can live on your dog, cat or rabbit. The females will start to lay eggs in the animal's fur, which then drop to the ground within a few hours. **A single female can lay thousands of eggs.** After a few days maggot-like larvae hatch from the eggs. These larvae migrate to dark places such as carpets, cracks in the floor or in pets bedding. The larvae feed on house dust for about 2 to 4 weeks or occasionally longer before spinning a cocoon into which they develop into adult fleas.

The adult flea breaks out of its cocoon to look for a blood meal - typically on your dog or cat but occasionally they may get you first!

The typical time from an egg falling to the floor to becoming a fully formed adult in a cocoon is 3-4 weeks in summer, but can be faster in high temperatures or slower in lower temperatures. **Fleas can wait as cocoons for in excess of 6 months** for an animal to walk past before emerging and jumping on board.

Symptoms of flea infestation

If fleas are present in large numbers on any animal they will cause irritation and itchiness and can even cause anaemia. Some animals are allergic to substances in flea saliva and in these cases only a few bites can cause severe discomfort. **Flea allergic dermatitis is the most common skin disease of dogs and cats.** In dogs, it will often affect the rear half of the body, with hair loss and itchiness. In cats, it will often cause scabs over the body (miliary dermatitis) or a symmetrical hair loss.

Fleas can also carry an immature form of tapeworm. If the flea is swallowed by the animal the tapeworm can then go on to grow inside your pet's gut. It is therefore important to treat for tapeworm if your pet has fleas.

Diagnosis of flea infestation

The easiest way to diagnose fleas is to see the flea. A flea comb can be a very effective way of finding fleas in some animals. A more reliable way of finding fleas, especially when the numbers of fleas is not great is to look for flea dirt/faeces. Flea dirt appears as small dark particles, often comma shaped, in your pet's coat. If the particles are placed on damp white paper or cotton wool and rubbed they will leave a reddish brown trace - this is the dried blood in the flea droppings. Sometimes you or your vet will not see any evidence of fleas or flea dirt, as persistent grooming and licking can remove the flea dirt, but if symptoms are suspicious it is still important to treat.

Treatment of flea infestation

If there is a problem with fleas then **all the animals in the household and their environment should be treated**. Even if only one animal in the household appears to be affected all must be treated as they are at risk of picking up newly hatched adult fleas. **It is imperative to treat the house as well as the animals because only 5% of the flea population is on the animal the remaining 95% being in the environment i.e. your home**. Large accumulations of eggs and larvae can build up in areas where your pet spends a lot of time e.g. bedding or a favourite armchair and these areas should have particular attention paid to them with regular vacuuming and washing in addition to the use of a good quality environmental spray - the sprays we recommend are effective for upto 1 year.

Flea control products are available at the surgery without an appointment provided we have seen the animals to be treated within the past year, however if your pet is itchy or has red sore skin or hair loss we would advise you make an appointment. Generally flea products from the supermarkets or pet shops are not as effective as those that are sold through veterinary surgeries. There are various products available that work in different ways, but in general we use a product that will kill adult fleas when they feed on your pet, sometimes in conjunction with other products.

To prevent flea infestation becoming a problem we advise year round treatment.