

What *you* need to know about **fleas**

Know thy enemy—and make sure your pet, your family and your home are kept flea-free.

Utter the “F” word (fleas, that is) and you’ll likely inspire looks of horror. Fleas are every pet owner’s worst nightmare. Why? Because these bloodsucking bugs can wreak havoc on your beloved pet and home.

It’s all about the life cycle

One adult female flea lays up to 50 eggs a day, which hatch and reproduce exponentially in a short time. Within the next two weeks, the eggs hatch into larvae, very small caterpillar-like creatures. The immature flea can remain in this stage for several days to a few weeks.

The larvae then spin a cocoon and enter the pupae stage. Adults usually emerge from their cozy covering within 14 days but can survive in the cocoon for several months until vibration, pressure, heat, noise, or carbon dioxide jolts them from their deep sleep.

Once they emerge from the cocoon, adult fleas must find a warm-blooded host within a few days—or they’ll die. Once a flea finds your pet, it will live out its life happily feeding off your four-legged friend. In no time, these hungry parasites can become a persistent, itchy, and dangerous problem.

Signs of flea infestation include:

- flea feces, or pepper-like specks, in your pet’s coat or on his bedding
- flea eggs, or light-colored specks, in your pet’s coat or on his bedding
- itchy skin (scratching)
- biting at his fur or legs
- patchy hair loss, especially near the tail or neck
- lethargy (especially in severe cases)
- tiny, dark brown insects scurrying around on your pet.



Fleas usually are more annoying than lethal, but they can spread tapeworms to your pet and other family members. Very small or young pets can develop anemia, a potentially life-threatening condition, because of blood loss from flea infestation. Call your veterinarian immediately if you find fleas on a puppy or kitten less than 12 weeks old or if your adult pet suddenly acts lethargic.

Intermittent flea exposure increases your pet’s risk for developing an allergic reaction called flea allergy dermatitis (FAD). Studies show that about 80 percent of allergic dogs also develop FAD.

Risk factors and detection

All pets are at risk for a flea infestation. Pets who spend time outdoors are particularly susceptible. Why? Many adult fleas live outside and on wildlife hosts until they find a happy home on your pet. Indoor dogs also are at risk because they can pick up fleas when they go outside to exercise or relieve themselves.

If you suspect your pet has fleas, it’s important to act right away. Call your veterinarian if your pet exhibits any of the signs detailed in the chart, left.