



Fleas

These pesky parasites are a year round problem in the UK, as our winters are fairly mild – and our houses are lovely cosy places which fleas can thrive in!

Fleas are blood sucking parasites that live on your pet and in your home. Most domestic pets including dogs, cats, rabbits and ferrets are at risk of flea infestation. They can make our furry friends lives miserable – and they can bite us too.

They can cause:

- **Intense itching and scratching** – which can result in hair loss
- **Flea allergic dermatitis** – a very common and unpleasant skin condition caused by an allergy to flea saliva
- **Tapeworm infestations** (as fleas carry tapeworm eggs)
- **Anaemia** – especially in puppies and kittens
- They can also **spread disease** such as myxomatosis in rabbits, and feline infectious anaemia in cats.

Fleas can be a huge problem for pet owners and once they are established in the home they can be quite difficult to get rid of, because of their complex life cycle. The adult fleas we see on our pets are only 5% of the problem and 95% of the flea life-cycle actually takes place in the carpets, floorboards and pet bedding in your home.

They are also a common problem, with 1 in 5 cats, and 1 in 10 dogs having fleas.

Fleas rarely jump from one pet to another, instead they are picked up from infested environments such as your garden, the local park, a friend's house, basically any place where an animal that has fleas, such as a rabbit, hedgehog, fox or another cat or dog, may be found.

The Flea Lifecycle

Fleas multiply fast, just one female flea can lay 50 eggs a day, so it can take as little as 21 days for one flea to become 1000!

- The adult flea lives on, and feeds off your pet.
- The female flea will start to lay eggs within 26 – 48 hours of her first blood meal. These eggs are not sticky and so will fall off your pet into your home, and your pet's environment, (such as deep into your carpets, furniture and even between the floor boards).
- The flea larvae emerge from the eggs after 2 – 14 days (this depends on the conditions the egg finds itself in). The larvae then start to feed on adult flea faeces and other organic material.
- The larvae go through 3 stages of growth and development, and this can take between 7 – 14 days (depending on the environmental conditions, and the amount of food available), although it can take longer.
- The larvae eventually spin a silk cocoon and pupate. While they are at this stage of development the flea is at its most resilient and is resistant to insecticides.

- The adult flea will emerge from its cocoon anywhere between 3 – 365 days after it spun it. It waits for just the right conditions before emerging, with warm temperatures, carbon dioxide and the vibrations caused by passing animals and people, triggering them to hatch.
- Once hatched the adult flea will use their well-developed back legs to jump onto passing animals for their first blood meal, and the life cycle begins again.

How to discover if your pet has fleas

- Adult fleas are tiny, they are only 1.5 – 3 mm in length, and so if there are only a few causing problems on your pet they can be difficult to spot.
- You can look for fleas on your pet by parting your pet's coat gently and looking for them, but the best way to tell if your pet has fleas is by checking for flea dirt (or flea poo!) To do this wipe a damp piece of cotton wool through your pet's coat (moving AGAINST the direction of the hair growth). This is likely to pick up flea dirt if there is any present – they are little black or dark brown dots. The flea dirt will dissolve in contact with the cotton wool, and the edge will turn a shade of red, this is because flea dirt consists mostly of your pet's blood.
- Alternatively, you can use a flea comb, or fine toothed comb to brush your pet's coat, and then put the brushings onto a damp piece of white kitchen paper.
- If your pet has only got a few adult fleas, you may not find any evidence of flea dirt in your pet's coat.

Prevention is better (and easier), than dealing with an established flea infestation.

The way in which you need to control fleas will depend on your individual pet's lifestyle, and on your home environment.

Even pets which never go outside need flea control – it only takes a visit from an untreated animal, or a flea egg hitching a ride with you to trigger an infestation in your home.

Pets that go outside regularly are likely to come into contact with fleas and so require regular treatment.

Remember that only 5% of a flea problem is on your pet, and 95% of the flea problem is in your environment.

We recommend that you use a prescription flea product regularly on your pet.

Most flea treatments are used every 4 weeks, although some can be used every 3 months, and prescription flea collars can last for up to 8 months.

There are a huge number of different prescription flea products available for your pet which include spot on liquids, collars, and injections. Some kill fleas as they jump onto your pet, some after the flea has fed on your pet, and some which basically put the fleas on the pill and prevent them from reproducing.

Speak to us about which product would be best for you and your pet.

It is important that your pet is weighed regularly to ensure that they are getting the right amount of flea prevention for them.

We run free nurse clinics to ensure that you have easy access to the best advice on flea prevention and treatment as possible.

Always make sure that the product that you use is the right one for your pet – for its size, and its species.

Do NOT use any flea products which contain Permethrin on cats (this can be found in some flea products available off the shelf in pet shops).

There are also flea treatments available for rabbits and ferrets – so please ask us for advice on the products suitable for these pets.

Remember that depending on which prescription flea product you decide to use on your pet it may be normal to see a few fleas on them even after they have been treated. This is because no product repels fleas (even those that claim to), so if your pet visits an infested area a few new adult fleas may jump onto them. Don't worry though these new fleas will be killed within 24 hours.

We also recommend that you use a veterinary recommended household flea spray in your home

These products will prevent the eggs from developing in your home for up to one year (depending on the product)

You should also use them in your car if you have one

They should NOT be used on your animals

These products can be highly toxic to birds and fish – so you need to make sure birds and their cages are removed, and that fish tanks are covered before you spray the room they are kept in.

Some of these products have the added advantage of reducing the number of house dust mites present in your home.

Why use Prescription flea treatments rather than non-prescription products?

We would rather help you prevent these pesky parasites, than have to treat your pets when they are suffering from the consequences of a flea infestation.

It's easier – and cheaper – to prevent a flea infestation than to have to deal with one. It can take up to 3 months of intensive flea treatments to get on top of a flea infestation once it is established.

Prescription flea treatments are only available from your vet, or via prescription from a pharmacist

Non-prescription products are available from pet shops, and from some pharmacies.

We offer free nurse clinics to help ensure that you get the right flea products for you and your pets. During these consultations we will weigh and assess your pet, and discuss your requirements with you. This will allow us to recommend a safe and effective product based on your pet's individual requirements.

Some flea products are highly toxic to cats – unfortunately we see a number of cats that have been avoidably and inadvertently poisoned by these products each year (some of them have only rubbed up against dogs which have been treated with the toxic flea product).

The prescription products that we recommend have been thoroughly tested and we know that they are effective, as well as safe.

We speak to many owners every year who have used non-prescription flea treatments, and 'natural' remedies which prove not to be as effective in treating flea infestations as the prescription products available through your vets. Unfortunately, in many cases there has been no controlled clinical research into these products – and as such they are not only ineffective, and do not do what they claim to do, but they may also be unsafe. Treating your pet and home with these products can often cost more in the long run, than the use of effective and safe prescription products.

Remember you don't have to buy your prescription flea treatment from us, you can ask us for a prescription to purchase your pet's flea control from a pharmacy if you would prefer, but please allow us to advise you on which products are best for your pet.

Here at My Pets Vets we offer a discount scheme which allows you to spread the cost of your pet's preventable health care across the year – whilst saving a considerable sum of money each year.

Just ask any member of our clinical team for more information on our Practice Care Plan.