

Flea Season Is Around the Corner – What's Your Strategy?

It's never too early to start planning your defense strategy for the 2023 pest season. Know the foods to feed now to make your pet less inviting to pests later. And because what you find on your pet makes up only about 5% of the fleas in your living environment, stock up on these in advance.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Flea season will be here before we know it, and if you live in a flea-endemic area, it can be a challenge to keep your pet pest-free
- Fleas have a 4-stage life cycle; adult fleas are what you'll find on your dog or cat, but believe it or not, they represent only 5% of the fleas in your environment
- Signs of fleas on your pet include scratching, patchy hair loss, and physical evidence of fleas or flea dirt
- A flea comb is your best defense against adult fleas on your pet; there are several steps you'll also need to take around your home to eliminate pests in the other 3 life stages
- Nontoxic repellents can be an effective deterrent to fleas on your pet and in your environment

Since "fleas" is one of the most frequently searched terms on this site, and since the 2023 pesky pest season will be here before we know it, I decided to tackle this ticklish topic a little early this year.

Fleas 101

One of the most pervasive, frustrating insects on the planet is the flea. Here's the Wikipedia description of these little blood-sucking parasites:

"Flea, the common name for the order Siphonaptera, includes 2,500 species of small flightless insects that live as external parasites of mammals and birds. Fleas live by ingesting the blood of their hosts. Adult fleas grow to about 3 millimetres (1/8 inch) long, are usually brown, and have bodies that are "flattened" sideways or narrow, enabling them to move through their hosts' fur or feathers.

They lack wings; their hind legs are extremely well adapted for jumping. Their claws keep them from being dislodged, and their mouthparts are adapted for piercing skin and sucking blood. They can leap 50 times their body length, a feat second only to jumps made by another group of insects, the superfamily of froghoppers.

Flea larvae are worm-like, with no limbs; they have chewing mouthparts and feed on organic debris left on their hosts' skin."¹

If you live in an area where fleas are a problem for pets, I think you'll find the following information eye opening and helpful in keeping these pests out of your home and off furry family members.

The Flea Life Cycle

Fleas have a four-stage life cycle:

- **Stage 1 – Egg** — Adult fleas lay eggs on your pet — from 20 to 28 a day. These eggs drop off your dog or cat and grow wherever they land, which is often on your furniture, carpets, throw rugs, and other flooring.
- **Stage 2 – Larva** — This is what the egg turns into, little worm-like creatures. Larva hatch from flea eggs.
- **Stage 3 – Pupa** — The larva forms a pupae, a cocoon of sorts, inside which it moves through additional growth stages that can take anywhere from about 10 days all the way up to 200 to complete.
- **Stage 4 – Adult** — Adult fleas are what the pupae evolve to and they're what you see on your pet. They live on average about 6 weeks, but they can live much longer. The only way to remove adult fleas from their natural habitat (your dog or cat) is to kill them or pick them off.

Most of the Fleas in Your Environment Aren't on Your Pet

Fleas reproduce at an astonishing rate. Ten female fleas can produce over 250,000 more fleas in a single month. And believe it or not, the adult fleas riding around on your pet are only about 5% of the fleas in your living environment. That means 95% of the fleas in your house are everywhere but on your pet.²

Flea eggs are most often found in carpets, bedding, floorboards, and soil. Flea larvae and pupae are found where your dog or cat spends most of her time, including her **bedding**, in carpets and area rugs, on upholstered furniture, on your bedding, and wherever else your pet hangs out.

Estimates are that for every adult flea on your pet, there are around 10 more wherever your pet spends time. That's why you must eliminate not only the adults on your dog or cat, but the eggs, larva and pupa in your home, yard and your pet's bedding.

How to Recognize a Flea Infestation

Once a flea hops aboard your pet, it will spend its remaining life feeding off your furry family member, causing a persistent itch-scratch cycle, mild to significant discomfort, and in some cases, more serious health problems.

It's also important to note that intermittent flea exposure increases your pet's risk for flea allergy dermatitis (FAD), which is an allergic (hypersensitive) reaction to the presence of fleas, and sometimes just a single flea can trigger FAD. Things to look for if you suspect your pet is dealing with fleas:

- Flea feces, also called flea dirt, which looks a lot like pepper, on your pet's fur or bedding
- Flea eggs, which are light-colored specks, in your pet's coat or on bedding
- Actual fleas crawling around on your pet (check armpits, around the tail and groin first)
- Your pet is scratching and/or biting at his coat or legs
- Your pet has patchy hair loss, typically around the neck or tail

- Lethargy

Fleas flourish when temperatures are between 65 and 80°F with humidity in the 75 to 85% range. In some locations flea season is year-round, but in others the types of fleas that bother pets and people aren't considered a big problem, for example, in the desert southwest, with its low humidity and high spring and summer temps.

Fleas can transmit tapeworms, cause cat scratch disease, and can even cause severe anemia, especially in young animals. However, the pests are primarily an annoyance, and if you live in flea-endemic area, it can seem like a constant battle to keep them under control.

What to Do if You Find Fleas on Your Pet

The best way to prevent a flea infestation is to proactively check for fleas daily during flea season. Removing a few fleas is a whole lot easier than fighting hundreds, which can occur quickly if you're not checking daily.

If you find a few fleas on your pet, don't panic. Instead, grab a flea comb and start combing; it's the best defense there is. Your dog or cat should be combed at least once daily with the flea comb. Place her on a light-colored towel to catch any fleas that fall off and dip the comb into a bowl of soapy water after each swipe (flush the contents down the toilet when you're done).

Bathe her frequently until the fleas are gone, as fleas are less attracted to clean animals and drown like any other creature when submerged under water.

Remember: Fleas on Your Pet Means Fleas in Your House

Vacuum all the areas of your home your pet has access to. Vacuum the carpet, area rugs, bare floors, upholstered furniture, pillows, your pet's bedding and even your own if your pet sleeps with you. Use the crevice tool and other attachments to vacuum along the baseboards and around the corners and edges of furniture.

Don't forget to vacuum hard-to-reach places like under furniture, beds, and closet floors. Dump the contents of your vacuum into a sealed bag and leave it outside your house.

If it makes sense, designate a single sleeping area for your pet — one you can clean easily. Fleas accumulate in pet sleeping spaces, so if you can limit those, it will be easier to control the situation. Your dog's or cat's bedding should be vacuumed daily and washed frequently.

You can apply a light dusting of food grade diatomaceous earth (DE) on your carpets, bare floors, and pet bedding. Make sure the DE is food grade, not pool filter grade, which is toxic if ingested. Like diatomaceous earth, cedar oil, another all-natural insect repellent, can be applied to your environment and pet bedding, as well as directly on your dog or cat.

You can also apply sodium polyborate powder (Borax) in hard to reach areas to get rid of fleas at the larval stage, just be sure to keep pets and children out of the area while you're applying the product (like DE, avoid inhaling the powder). The powder works for a year once it's applied unless you have your carpets steam cleaned.

Nontoxic Flea Repellants

The time to deter fleas is before they become a problem. Apple cider vinegar (ACV) is one option to consider, and while it doesn't kill fleas, it does repel them.

You can make a solution out of equal parts ACV and water. I recommend using a raw, organic product. Add the mixture to a spray bottle and spritz it on your pet (avoid face) before he heads outdoors. You can also spray his bedding.

To "supercharge" the spray and make it even more distasteful to fleas, add in a few drops of dog-safe essential oils. Geranium, lemongrass, lavender, neem and catnip oil are good choices that will help deter fleas (as well as ticks, mosquitos and other pests) from your pet. I use 10 drops for every 8 ounces of spray.

You can also add ACV to your pet's food. Use about 1 teaspoon per 20 pounds of dog. (Most dogs don't like the taste of water with ACV, so I don't recommend adding it because it could cause your pet to consume less water.)

Another option is to pour diluted ACV over a freshly bathed dog. Add 1 cup of ACV to 1 gallon of water and pour it over your dog while he's still wet. Massage the solution into his coat, don't rinse, and towel him dry.

Then finish off with a light dusting of food-grade diatomaceous earth down your dog's back (avoid face), which provides extra protection during the worst weeks of flea season. Flea comb after every outdoor excursion during flea season.

A Healthy Pet Naturally Repels Fleas

It's extremely important to feed your dog or cat a nutritionally balanced, species-specific, fresh food diet that will help keep his immune system functioning optimally. Most vets agree: fleas and other parasites are less attracted to healthy animals, and a vibrantly healthy body is less hospitable to parasite infestations.

In fact, even within the same households I have had animals repeatedly plagued with fleas while other pets in the home have no issues, so working on your pet's individual immune system, including optimizing gut health, is important.

Also provide pure drinking water and limit your pet's exposure to unnecessary vaccines and medications, environmental chemicals (including lawn chemicals), and electromagnetic fields (EMFs).

Sources and References

¹ [Wikipedia](#)

² [dvm360, January 31, 2017](#)
