Help Make Your Pet Hostile Toward Fleas and Ticks

Some animals just seem to attract parasites when the season comes, and there's a good reason why. How to help your pet fold away the 'welcome' sign and stay healthy and comfortable during flea and tick season.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Parasites are attracted to weak animals, so one of the best defenses against fleas and ticks is to optimize your pet's vitality; feed your pet a balanced, species-appropriate fresh-food diet and minimize environmental chemical load to help keep his immune system strong
- Making your home and yard inhospitable to pests via vacuuming, lawn-mowing, brush-clearing and washing pet bedding is important
- Inspect your pet for ticks at least once daily, and if you identify fleas use a flea comb to remove them

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published July 02, 2016.

With warmer weather comes an increased risk of flea and tick exposure for your pets. Many veterinarians recommend chemical preventives as a solution (some even recommend them to pets year-round), but I don't agree with turning to chemicals as a means of controlling nature.

Many of my conventional veterinary peers suggest a "one-size-fits-all" approach for pests, but I suggest you think about a more commonsense approach when it comes to dealing with summer pests.

In deciding how to best protect your pet from fleas and ticks, you'll need to take into account when pest season begins and ends in your area, your pet's individual risk (do you go for long walks in the woods, for instance?), as well as the level of disease risk in your area.

What Are the Risks of Fleas to Pets?

Fleas and ticks are very different pests, each with their own set of risks. Fleas, which are related to ants and beetles, feed on blood and their bites can lead to irritation and skin allergies.

Flea allergy dermatitis (FAD), which is actually sensitivity (allergy) to flea saliva, is a very common condition in dogs. It's not the bite of the flea that causes most of the itching in dogs with FAD, it's the saliva. The saliva causes irritation way out of proportion to the actual number of fleas on the pup.

Lots of dog parents assume if their pet isn't infested with fleas, the itching can't be caused by fleas. But if your dog has FAD, the saliva of just one or two fleas can make him miserably itchy and uncomfortable for many weeks, even after the fleas are gone.

Fleas can also transmit tapeworms, cause cat scratch disease and may even cause severe cases of anemia, especially in young animals. However, fleas are primarily an annoyance, and if you live in an area where fleas thrive, it can seem like a constant battle to keep them under control.

Fleas flourish in temperatures between 65 and 80 degrees Fahrenheit 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.

Another important caveat: fleas are not typically attracted to healthy pets. They're typically drawn to the weakest animals they can find, first, so one of the best defenses against flea infestations is to feed your pet a balanced, species-appropriate fresh-food diet that will help keep his immune system functioning optimally.

In addition to diet, remove the environmental factors that can negatively impact your pet's immune system including:

- **Poor water quality —** Make sure to provide fluoride- and chlorine-free drinking water.
- **Too many vaccines —** Demand your vet check protection levels prior to giving more vaccines (called a titer test). Vaccinating unnecessary doesn't build your pet's immune system, it destroys it.
- **Toxic household chemical load —** Eliminate nonorganic pet beds sprayed with PBDEs (flame retardants) that disrupt your pet's endocrine system and toxic household cleaners that end up inside your pet.
- **Yard chemicals —** Eliminate pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers around your home that negatively impact your pet's immunologic health.
- **EMFs —** Provide your pet with a safe zone that's free from toxic levels of electromagnetic fields from electrical devices in the home.

What Are the Risks of Ticks?

Ticks are a type of arachnid related to mites, spiders and scorpions. They're resilient, increasingly resistant to pesticides and found throughout the U.S.

Because ticks feed on many different animals (humans, dogs, cats, squirrels, mice, opossums, deer and more), and they feed for long periods of time, they're quite good at acquiring and transmitting diseases, some of which can be life-threatening. Tick-borne diseases include:

- Lyme disease
- Rocky Mountain spotted fever
- Anaplasmosis
- Babesiosis
- Cytauxzoonosis
- Ehrlichiosis
- Hepatozoonosis
- Tularemia

Unfortunately, a single tick bite can expose your pet to multiple diseases, but exposure is not the same as infection. In many cases, your pet will be able to fight off tick-borne diseases with no treatment required.

Hands down, one of my biggest pet peeves in clinical practice is how many vets unnecessarily prescribe antibiotics when a dog's blood shows exposure has occurred.

Most dogs' immune systems do exactly what they're supposed to do when a foreign bacteria enters their bodies — mounts an effective immune response. The only way to know if the dog has effectively eliminated the bacteria (was exposed but not infected) or is currently infected is to follow up with a second test called a QC6.

If your pet tests positive for exposure, it's important to follow up with the Quantitative C6 (QC6) test, which differentiates exposure from infection.

I see dozens of dogs each year unnecessarily treated with extensive antibiotic therapy because their veterinarian panicked after seeing a positive exposure. Please don't let your vet do this!

Up to 90% of dogs may have exposure to these tick-borne pathogens, but most dogs' immune systems fight off these infections all on their own.

In those that do not, quickly identifying the problem is important to devise an appropriate treatment plan. I recommend that my clients living in endemic areas or dogs that are bit by multiple ticks each year test their pets every six months.

How do you make sure you're catching possible tick-borne infections before they take hold? Ask your vet to replace the standard heartworm test with a more comprehensive annual blood test that identifies several tick-borne potential pathogens long before dogs show symptoms.

The SNAP 4Dx Plus and the Accuplex4 tests, which screen for heartworm, Lyme disease and two strains each of ehrlichia and anaplasma should be screening tests for dogs in tick-endemic areas, in my opinion. Completing this simple blood test every six to 12 months is the best way to avoid unnecessary chemical application, identify infections before chronic disease occurs and prevent overlooking cases of dogs infected because of pesticide resistance (a growing problem in veterinary medicine).

I also recommend that pets living in tick-infested areas who test positive on the SNAP 4Dx Plus or the Accuplex4 also be screened for Babesia exposure. The best way to detect exposure to this parasite is with a PCR (polymerase chain reaction) test that checks for the presence of Babesia DNA.

Think Twice Before Opting for Chemical Preventives

I strongly discourage pet owners from automatically applying harsh chemical agents to repel or kill pests. The use of spot-on products may cause skin irritation, paralysis, seizures and even death if used improperly, and there are superior natural alternatives that are far safer.

In addition, ticks may be resistant to pesticides, which means your dog may still be exposed to tick-borne diseases even if you use chemical preventives.

Every year I see canine patients who have been given monthly doses of pesticides for years, yet turn up positive for tick-borne illness, including many dogs with Lyme disease that have been vaccinated against it. If, however, you choose to use these chemicals, follow these precautions:

1. Be very careful to follow dosing directions on the label, and if your pet is at the low end of a dosage range use the next lowest dosage. Be extremely cautious with small dogs, and do not under any circumstances apply dog product to your cat.
2. Don't depend exclusively on chemical treatments. Rotate natural preventives with chemical ones including diatomaceous earth, pet-friendly essential oil products and natural deterrent collars. An every-other-month rotation works well for many pet owners. In many parts of the country owners find they can successfully control ticks with two doses a year: one in the spring and one in the late summer.
3. Monitor your pet for adverse reactions after you apply a chemical product — especially when using one for the first time.
4. Since your pet's liver will be tasked with processing the chemicals that make it into the bloodstream, it can be very beneficial to give your dog or cat a supplement to help detoxify her liver. I recommend milk thistle, which is a detox agent and also helps to actually regenerate liver cells.

   You can get milk thistle at any health food store. Work with your vet on how much to give your pet depending on her age, weight and the medications she's taking. I recommend one dose daily for seven days following any flea, tick or heartworm application.
5. Another product I recommend is chlorella, a super green food that is a very powerful detox agent. Your holistic vet should also advise you about how much chlorella to give your pet depending on her toxin load.

Make Your Home and Yard Inhospitable to Fleas and Ticks

One of the key strategies to controlling fleas and ticks involves making your home and yard less hospitable to such pests. To do so:[1]

- Vacuum your home often (carpets, floors, furniture, etc.) and empty the vacuum canister immediately
- Wash bed linens, pet bedding and throw rugs frequently
- Keep your lawn mowed and clear brush, leaves, tall grass and weeds from your yard and areas your pet frequents
- Keep stacked wood off the ground and away from your house
- After the growing season, clear perennial plants and other brush from your garden
- Add beneficial nematodes to your yard

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 your pet 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 your pet frequently until the fleas are gone, as fleas are less attracted to clean animals and drown like any other creature when submerged under water. You can also apply a light dusting of food-grade diatomaceous earth (DE) on your carpets, bare floors and pet bedding, as well as down your pet's spine (avoid her head) to kill fleas.

How to Remove a Tick

It's important to check your pet for ticks daily, especially after returning from walks outside. Most tick-borne diseases take many hours to be transmitted to your pets, so removing ticks soon after they attach may help prevent illness. If you take your pet to an area of high risk, such as a forest preserve, check for ticks as soon as you get home, being sure to check hard-to-see spots like between and under the toes, in the earflaps and around the tail base.

If you find a tick on your pet, be sure to remove it correctly. Don't use your bare hands because you can become infected by handling or crushing an infected tick. Wear gloves, or even better, use a tick-removing tool.

Grasp the tick very close to your pet's skin with a tick removal tool or a pair of tweezers. Carefully pull the tick's body away from the skin making sure you've grasped the entire tick. Once it's off, flush it down the toilet. Then disinfect your pet's skin with soapy water or diluted povidone iodine (Betadine). I also recommend applying a drop of lavender oil to the bite.

Monitor the attachment site for the next few days. If you notice any irritation or inflammation of the skin, contact your veterinarian. You'll want to watch your dog closely for several months after for any signs of loss of appetite, lethargy, change in gait, fever or intermittent limping — all the symptoms of potential tick-borne disease.

Better yet, three to four weeks after removing the tick, have your vet run the Accuplex or 4DX/QC6 test. The period of subclinical infection (when the dog has no symptoms) is when integrative practitioners see excellent treatment success.

The Best Natural Approach for Flea and Tick Prevention

Exposure to pests is a fact of life for pets, especially those that spend a lot of time outdoors. Keeping your pet's immune system strong by feeding a balanced, unprocessed and fresh-food diet, encouraging regular exercise and minimizing his exposure to vaccines, topical pesticides and other environmental toxins will go a long way toward minimizing his risk.

Fresh garlic can also be given to dogs and cats, in tiny amounts, to help prevent internal as well as external parasites. And for times when you know you'll be at high risk, botanical oils specifically formulated to be applied to pets make an excellent natural repellent. Examples to look for include blends of:

- **Lemongrass, neem and catnip oil —** When formulated into a spray for pets, it promotes a shiny, healthy coat, and helps repel fleas, ticks and mosquitoes.
- **Geranium oil —** An effective essential oil that helps deter mosquitoes, fleas, ticks and other pests from attacking your dog or cat.

By using these commonsense approaches, your pet can enjoy the outdoors this summer without the nuisance of fleas and the dangers of tick-borne diseases. Remember that, in the latter case, a simple blood test done every six months can identify any related infections so they can be quickly treated.

Sources and References

[1] VetStreet August 7, 2015