

FLEAS

Introduction

Flea infestation is one of the most common problems occurring in cats and dogs in the UK. Every cat and dog is likely to suffer from fleas at some time during its life, yet by taking a few simple precautions, pets can be protected.

Fleas aren't generally a health risk to humans and with regular anti-flea treatment of both your pet and your home, the risk of being bitten and suffering from skin irritation is rare.

What is a Flea?

A flea is a small wingless parasitic insect. It has six powerful legs, arranged in three pairs, which enables it to jump considerable distances. The most common type of flea infecting pets in the UK is *Ctenocephalides felis*, or the cat flea.

Source of Infections in Pets

Fleas are frequently picked up from other animals or the environment. Fleas are very common and are not a sign of poor hygiene. The eggs and larvae develop in the environment (carpet, bedding, lawn). After hatching, the adult flea then jumps on its next host. This means pets can easily pick up fleas not only from other animals but also from where another animal has been.

Warm and humid weather leads to an increase in cat and dog flea numbers. However, flea populations survive and reproduce all year round because indoor temperatures do not fall substantially in winter due to central heating and improved insulation. It is important to check for fleas all year round. Prolonged exposure to flea bites and saliva can sensitise an animal and result in allergies. In young or debilitated animals, flea numbers can spiral and lead to significant blood loss.

Diagnosis in Animals

Most pet owners only start to think about fleas either when they are bitten or when their pet is continuously scratching. If infestation is suspected, combing the animal's coat with a flea comb will pick up both the dark granules of flea faeces and the odd flea. When the flea faeces is placed on moist paper or cotton wool, it produces a brown/red halo.

Treatment in Animals

Fleas are a fact of life and the only way to avoid this inevitability is to be proactive. There are many anti-flea preparations on the market, some more effective than others. A spray or spot-on on prescription from your veterinary surgeon can give protection for two months, whereas a powder or shampoo may only work for a few days. Licenses are granted for minimum age; one efficacious flea-spray (prescription only medicine) can be used from two days of age.

The majority of anti-flea preparations aim to kill adult fleas although some are only repellents. However, adult fleas are only one stage in the life-cycle and there are now treatments available which will deal with the other life-stages. In addition, it is absolutely essential to **treat all** your cats and dogs **and your home** to ensure any remaining fleas are eradicated.

Your veterinary practice or pet shop will be able to advise you on an effective treatment programme for both your pets and your home.

Fleas and Humans

Fleas aren't generally a health risk to humans and with regular anti-flea treatment of both your pet and your home, the risk of being bitten and skin irritation is rare.

Conclusion

Fleas are, unfortunately, a fact of life. However with regular flea treatment of both the pet(s) and the house itself, this problem can be easily controlled.

Pets are Good for People

Pets provide us with loyalty, companionship, love and affection, as well as the many physical and psychological benefits. The least we can do to repay this is to ensure that we keep them in the best of health. A healthy pet is a happy pet and a happy pet can help us enjoy a much fuller and more rewarding life.

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For further information, please contact the Pet Health Council on:

Telephone: 020 7379 6545

Email: enquiries@pethealthcouncil.co.uk

Website: www.pethealthcouncil.co.uk