

Flea Facts



In North America, the most common ectoparasite of dogs and cats is *Cephalopoda felis* (the cat flea). Cat fleas are found to infest more than 50 different avian and mammalian hosts throughout the world, including cats, dogs, raccoons, and opossums. In the southeastern United States, opossums have been found to be the most commonly infested wild mammal. They routinely contaminate yards, nearby wooded areas, and parks with fleas that later spread to unprotected pets.

The flea is a wingless insect with a hard exoskeleton, a laterally flattened body, and an enlarged third pair of legs that allow it to jump between hosts. Fleas in the adult stage spend most of their life on the pet. Flea eggs, larvae, and pupae can be found off the pet, on surfaces such as bedding, carpet, or grass. Adult fleas require a living host for obtaining regular blood meals. They pierce the skin of the host with their mouthparts and suck the host's blood.

Flea populations increase during spring and summer but are found year-round in North America. Environmental temperatures less than 37.4 degrees Fahrenheit for several days will kill all stages of fleas. Adult fleas survive winter by living on pets housed indoors. They offer the ideal breeding ground for the flea to survive during colder months. Adult fleas can live one to two months without a blood meal and seven to eight months with a blood meal. A female adult cat flea cannot lay eggs until 24 to 48 hours after she has had a blood meal and has mated. Each day, a female cat flea drinks 15 times her body weight in blood and produces up to twice her body weight in eggs. Female cat fleas can lay an average of 30 eggs per day to a maximum of 50 eggs a day and more than 2,000 eggs over a lifetime. Eggs usually hatch in one to six days, depending on temperature and humidity. Humidity below 50% will kill flea eggs. The flea's pupal stage lasts one to two weeks under favorable conditions. However, when conditions are cool and moist, this stage of the insect's development can survive nearly a year.

Pets can be treated with veterinarian-prescribed products that are administered topically, orally, or by injection. You should always review how to administer the product by reading the label before using the product, noting any cautions or contraindications. Flea products that are labeled for use on dogs should never be used on cats. They are also administered according to the pet's weight; therefore, it is important to weigh pets routinely. All dogs and cats in the household must to be treated with flea preventatives in order to avoid persistent or recurring infestations.

In addition to treating the pet, it is important to implement indoor and outdoor treatment measures to effectively control fleas. Indoor flea populations are most dense in areas where pets sleep. You should wash bedding in hot soapy water once a week. Floors, carpets, and upholstered furniture should be thoroughly vacuumed daily, including baseboards and other crevices. You may also need to vacuum any vehicles that may have been used to transport the pet. Vacuuming helps to remove not only adult fleas, eggs, and larvae but also pupae. Vacuuming can kill up to 96% of adult fleas and up to 100% of fleas in the pupal and larval stage. If you have a bagless vacuum empty the contents into a trash bag, then remove the bag from the inside of the house. Also, rinse the vacuum parts that can be cleaned with soap and water. If your vacuum has a bag, the bag must be changed after each use. Outdoor flea control can start with removing organic debris such as fallen leaves and woodpiles from around the house. Trim low-hanging vegetation to allow sunlight penetration as this will inhibit larvae development. Because some flea control products used outdoors may affect other species, such as butterflies, bees, and aquatic invertebrates, you should always read the cautions on all products and carefully follow the application instructions on the label.

Flea infestation of pets is a common problem for many pet owners. To help prevent and resolve flea problems in your household ask your veterinarian what prescribed product would be best for your situation.