

## **HOLISTIC APPROACH TO FLEAS**

BY Dr. JOHN FUDENS

Flea allergy dermatitis is the single most common skin disease in dogs and cats. It is caused by an allergy to a substance in flea saliva. When the flea bites the skin to suck blood, a chemical reaction occurs between the saliva and the immune system. The immune system then attacks the saliva, thus producing the allergic reaction.

There are four types of allergic reactions. The first occurs within minutes or hours of the flea bite. The second occurs 1-2 days later. The third occurs at the site of the bite. The fourth occurs systemically whereby the entire body is in a reactive state. Symptoms of a reaction include redness, swelling or itching at the location of the bite. The most common area for flea bites on dogs and cats is the posterior half of the body. Flea allergy dermatitis will occur even though you do not see the flea on your pet.

The flea's life cycle can vary from 1 month to 1 year. The eggs from the female flea fall to the ground and develop from egg to larva to pupa to adult. The adult does not live on the dog or cat but only uses them as a blood meal. After feeding which takes 5-10 minutes or less, the flea jumps off to digest the blood meal. This means the flea can land in the house or immediate pet environment. The most conducive environment for fleas is a warm, moist and dark place. Flea allergy dermatitis (FAD) can result from the presence of only 1 flea which is invisible because they do not live on the body.

The adult flea excretes stool and eggs that compose the deposits that you may see on your pet's body. There are also black deposits of digested blood. The flea can also carry tapeworm eggs which when the dog/cat eats the flea will develop into tapeworms that attach to the intestinal wall and suck the pet's blood. Therefore, fleas suck blood from the dog or cat and then give them tapeworms which also suck blood. This can result in anemia if the blood loss is severe enough besides the allergic skin reaction. This small pest creates much havoc including the biting of humans in the absence of an available dog or cat.

There are numerous ways to handle flea infestations but these are three areas that must be addressed.

1. The yard or outside home environment must be safe for your pet. It is the source of all fleas. It is imperative to walk your dog (if possible) in an area that is not likely infested or a home for the fleas. Avoid woods, bushes, tall grasses or areas where large numbers of dogs congregate if possible. This also cuts down contagion for ticks and other insects. The yard must be treated with either chemicals or by natural methods on a regular basis. This is to be done continuously depending on the climate where the animals live. The winter months with cold and snow are not applicable. The flea, like all insects, thrive in warm weather. But as soon as the frost is over the ground has to be treated as the flea eggs will start to hatch.

2. The home can be treated with chemicals or natural alternatives like boric acid and diatomaceous earth. This must also be done on a regular basis notwithstanding the outside temperature if the house is to be kept free of fleas. Rugs and upholstered furniture must be vacuumed regularly and the bag discarded immediately. Fleas and other life stages are in the bag and you do not want them getting back into the house.

3. There are drugs available for your dog and cat. Advantage or similar chemicals are an option but please underdose your pet by at least 50% of the suggested amount. The full dose contains too much for your animal. If necessary, you can administer the remaining 50% at a later point in time. Alternatively, you may purchase the next lower dosage. Treatment will still be effective but you are using less poison and not so adversely affecting your pet's health.

For natural products there are shampoos, powders, oils/sprays (not for cats) to be applied topically. There is also a natural supplement, called Flea Free, to be added daily to their food. This product contains garlic, yeast, herbs and apple cider vinegar, thus making the dog/cat less attractive to the fleas. The natural route takes a bit more time and effort but is far safer, cheaper and much healthier for all concerned. Remember any and all unresolved health issues will make the dog/cat more attractive to fleas, thus all ailments should be addressed as a healthy pet is the best defense against fleas.

When you use a natural program to handle flea infestation, poison control is eliminated or greatly reduced to only the amount needed to rid your pet of the problem.

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