

Fleas by Dr. John Fudens HMC DVM PH

What do fleas look like?

Adult fleas are normally 1-4mm long, brownish in color, without wings but with powerful legs adapted for jumping and piercing, sucking mouth parts. Their bodies are covered with backward projecting spines that help them move between the hairs on the host animal. Cat and dog fleas are usually found together and are similar in appearance. Female fleas can live up to two years, during which time they can lay up to 1000 eggs each. The female cat flea's head is twice as long as it is wide. Both cat and dog fleas have a row of very heavy spines on the front of the head (genal comb) and on the back part of the first body segment (pronotal comb). Cat and dog flea larvae are ¼ inch long when fully developed and look much like fly maggots. They have 13 body segments, are a dirty-white color with backward projecting hairs on each body segment. They also have a pair of hook-like appendages on the last abdominal segment

Where do they live?

Adult fleas live exclusively as parasites of warm-blooded animals. The females lay their eggs close to or on the infested animal. Wall to wall carpeting and soft furnishings also provide a relatively undisturbed environment for fleas to develop. They can also live in cracks and crevices in bare floors. They need warmth, moisture and darkness.

What do they eat?

Larvae feed on debris and adult flea droppings. Adult fleas feed solely on blood with their piercing and sucking mouthparts. Cat and dog fleas prefer feeding on cats and dogs, but also feed on humans. Cat and dog fleas go through complete metamorphosis. The females lay four to eight eggs after each blood meal. The eggs fall into the nest of the host animal or wherever the animal happens to be at that time. The eggs hatch in about 10 days.

How much of a pest are they?

Fleas are not just an inconvenience. Their saliva is considered one of the most allergenic substances on earth, and is the cause of a nasty skin disease in pets called Flea Allergic Dermatitis (FAD). Also, when they bite, fleas ingest blood. If the infestation is severe enough, it can cause anemia or even death in small puppies or kittens. That's not to mention the embarrassment of having your home infested with fleas, and the discomfort if you're bitten as well.

Many pet owners simply purchase a flea collar, or use a spot -on or spray as control, this is not enough, fleas only feed on your furry friends then jump off into your carpets and sofas where they lay their eggs, they do lay eggs on your pets as well, these later fall off and hatch in the environment, so it's very important to treat the environment.

How to get rid of fleas for good?

Vacuum twice a day and remove the bag empty after each vacuum for at least 2-3 weeks or longer.

Spray carpets and furnishings especially places you can't reach with the vacuum.

Wash your pets bedding regularly in the washing machine, or for larger animals soak the bed in the bath with some bleach, you can use color safe bleach if necessary. See my article on flea allergy dermatitis for complete handling of fleas on pet, home and outside environment.

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