

F a c t s

Effective Control of Fleas

What Do Fleas Look Like?

Fleas are a common pest of many types of animals, including humans. Although they are wingless, their hind legs are well adapted for jumping. Fleas can jump a maximum distance of 20 cm vertically and 41 cm horizontally. Adult fleas are small, dark brown or reddish brown ranging in length from 1 to 4 mm. Their bodies are flattened from side to side allowing them to move easily through hair or fur.



Adult fleas may remain dormant for several months until favorable conditions, such as increased temperature and carbon dioxide, allow their emergence. Vibrations indicating the presence of a host also stimulate their emergence. This explains why fleas in unoccupied homes become active as soon as humans or pets re-enter. Although there are four stages of flea development, it is most likely that you will see the adult stage.

A female flea can lay 25 eggs per day, producing approximately 800 eggs in its life. Fleas usually feed several times a day on animals but they can survive several weeks without a meal. The peak season for flea infestations outdoors is from early August to early October. While cats and dogs are the primary hosts of fleas, humans can also be bitten. Only female fleas bite. The bites cause the formation of a small, hard, red, itchy spot on the skin. When the flea bites the skin, it injects a secretion to prevent its host's blood from clotting. The itchiness is due to a reaction of the body's immune system to the secretion. Reactions are specific to each individual; some may be more affected than others. To relieve the itchiness, apply ice cubes or calamine lotion to the bite.

Flea Control in the Home

The following tips may help to reduce or eliminate flea infestations significantly. To break the flea cycle the homeowner must rely on a combination of cleaning practices and chemical treatments.

Cleaning

Vacuuming on a daily basis to remove all stages of the life cycle is the best method to gain initial control. It is important to include the following areas: carpets, cushioned furniture, cracks and crevices on floors and along baseboards, and the basement. Steam cleaning carpets may also help as the hot steam and soap can kill fleas in all stages.

— *Health & Environment Facts* —

Pay particular attention to areas where pets sleep. Wash all pet bedding and family bedding on which pets lie in hot, soapy water every two to three weeks. This is an important step as adults may lay eggs on pets, which then fall off in areas where pets rest. Lift blankets by all four corners to avoid scattering the eggs and larvae. If an infestation is severe, discard old pet bedding and replace it with fresh, clean material.

Chemical Control

Consulting a licensed pest control operator may be necessary. Treatment with an insecticide is usually required to control a severe infestation. There are numerous flea products registered for use in Canada. It is important to read label directions carefully before purchasing and using a product since their uses may vary. While insecticides do not control flea eggs, they will control adult fleas and flea larvae. A repeat treatment is therefore often required to break the cycle. Re-treat only if necessary or as indicated on the product label.

When using a flea product registered for use on mattresses, do not treat sheets or blankets. Washing them in hot water will kill existing fleas, eggs and larvae.

Treat around doors, window frames and foundations with a residual insecticide to help prevent entry into the home. Check all screens to ensure they are in good repair. Treatment of the yard and around the outdoor resting and play areas of pets should be considered as part of the overall flea control program. Cover children's sandboxes when not in use.

Remember:

- Before purchasing an insecticide product, identify the pest correctly. Read all label directions and follow safety precautions. Provide adequate ventilation.
- After handling an insecticide always wash your hands thoroughly. Do not permit people or pets to contact treated areas until the area has completely dried.
- Do not reuse empty insecticide containers. Ensure partially used insecticide containers are stored safely or are disposed of at hazardous wastes sites.

Flea Control on Pets

The regular inspection of pets, especially during peak flea season, is essential. Look for fleas or the presence of 'flea dirt' (black particles the size of pepper) on the skin. During an infestation, use a registered product that is appropriate for use on animals. Before using a product, read the label carefully and consult with a veterinarian to determine the best method of treatment.

For More Information

Health Canada, Pest Management Regulatory Agency, <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/cps-spc/pest/index-eng.php>

Source: Health Canada, 2003, Effective Control of Fleas