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TREATING FLEAS

THE FLEA LIFECYCLE

In order to understand why one spot on treatment won't fix a flea problem, we need to understand a little about the flea life cycle.

1. An Adult Flea – after jumping onto a host and eating a blood meal, the adult flea changes it's metabolism into reproduction mode. An adult female flea can lay up to 40 eggs daily and lives for 4-6weeks. **That's 1120-1680 eggs in a lifetime.**
2. Eggs – this lifestage is about 30% of the flea population at any given time. The eggs are laid on the host and fall off into the environment. They incubate best between 18.3-26.6 degrees and can remain dormant for up to 2 weeks. **This stage is resistant to insecticides!!!**
3. Larvae – this lifestage is about 60% of the flea population at any given time. The tiny, caterpillar-like larvae feed on faeces of fleas that have dropped off the animal or are in the environment. The time in the larval stage depends on environment – can be as little as 9 days or up to 6 months! The larvae molt 3 times then enter a cocoon and become pupae. **Larvae are particularly susceptible to heat and so prefer to be in sheltered areas such as under the house or indoors.**
4. Pupae – once the flea enters it's cocoon, it is nearly invincible! They can remain dormant in this stage for up to a year waiting for the right conditions to emerge. **Vibrations, carbon dioxide, sound and warmth (for example, vacuuming!!) will encourage the young flea to emerge from its cocoon!**
5. Young Adult Flea – Once hatched, the young adult flea can go months before feeding but once it has found a host, it will never purposely leave.

During summer, the entire life cycle can take place in as little as 2-3 weeks however, it can take almost 2 years – no wonder they are so difficult to get rid of!

THE ENVIRONMENT

As you can see, most of the flea life cycle occurs OFF the animal so it is important you address this in your management of fleas. A thorough vacuum of all areas of the house, particularly carpets should be completed as often as possible. Any bedding that the animal sleeps on should be washed in hot water and left out in the sun to dry. Fence off or treat any areas under the house where the animal has access to. New evidence suggests flea bombs settle on floors/furniture from above whereas other Insect Growth Regulator sprays are sprayed from lower down and will better eliminate fleas and their life cycle. We recommend discussing the use of these with a pesticide company.

THE ANIMAL

The next step is treating the animal. It is important you treat every animal in your house and if possible other animals that your pets are in contact with. Treatment should be completed in the following order:

1. Give your animal a Capstar tablet > this will kill all adult fleas on them within the hour. These can be given daily for 6 consecutive days (for dogs) or every 36 hours for cats.
2. Bath your animal in a soothing shampoo such as Aloveen. Be sure to pick off as many fleas as possible and dry their coat thoroughly. A 'flea' shampoo is not necessary and can be an extra irritant to the already inflamed skin.
3. Apply a spot on such as Advantage or Activyl. Use these every 2-3 weeks for 6 weeks then continue monthly indefinitely. Be sure not to apply this within 48hours of a bath or swim.
4. Flea control with monthly tablets are also made available for cats,- Comfortis is often an effective treatment and to be given with a meal.

Due to the nature of the flea life cycle, the best results are obtained when treatment continues year round. When strict flea control is not possible, corticosteroids can be used to block the allergic reaction and give relief. This is often a necessary part of dealing with a flea allergy but will not solve the flea problem, only reduce the itching. Dogs are more resistant to the side-effects of steroids than humans, but significant side-effects can occur. For this reason, the goal is to administer the smallest amount of steroid needed to keep the dog comfortable. Some dogs develop a secondary bacterial or yeast infection in the skin. When this occurs, appropriate antibiotics or fungicides must be used and steroid therapy reduced even further.

What is meant by the term flea allergy?

In spite of common belief, a normal dog experiences only minor skin irritation in response to flea bites. Even in the presence of dozens of fleas, there will be very little itching. On the other hand, the flea allergic dog has a severe, itch-producing reaction to flea bites – even one bite from one flea can set of a chain of events that results in severe irritation all over the body! This occurs because the dog develops an allergic response to the flea's saliva. When the dog or cat is bitten, flea saliva is deposited in the skin. Just one bite causes intense itching and this is of a long lasting nature.

The most important treatment for flea allergy is to get the dog/cat away from all fleas. Therefore, strict flea control is mandatory and this involves ensuring the dog/cat is flea-free and also removing fleas from the environment as mentioned above. Unfortunately, complete flea control is invariably difficult, particularly with dogs/cats staying outdoors in summertime when the weather is warm and humid, where a new population of fleas can hatch out every day.