

Flea and Tick Prevention

- Fleas and ticks are external parasites that can cause extreme discomfort and serious illness in pets and even people.
- Fleas and ticks are easily prevented from bothering your pet through the use of safe, easy to administer, effective products.
- Parasite prevention also may require treating your home and yard and keeping pets out of areas where fleas and/or ticks are likely to lurk.
- Flea or tick control products meant for dogs should never be used on cats and vice versa.

What Are Fleas and Ticks?

Fleas and ticks are external parasites that can cause extreme discomfort for your pet and can also cause serious diseases.

Fleas

Fleas are insects that are ubiquitous in the environment—meaning they can be found almost everywhere. There are more than 2000 species of fleas, but the common cat flea (*Ctenocephalides felis*) is the one that most commonly afflicts dogs and cats.

A disease of concern that can be caused by fleas is flea allergy dermatitis (FAD), which is a severe allergic reaction to flea bites. Some pets are so allergic that even a single bite can cause a reaction. FAD makes pets miserable. In severe cases, it can cause severe itching and inflammation that, if left untreated, can lead to excessive scratching and chewing that can damage the skin. Secondary bacterial or fungal infections can develop as a result.

Fleas can also play a role in transmitting parasites, such as tapeworms, and bacterial diseases, such as cat scratch fever (bartonellosis), to humans.

Finally, in very severe infestations, particularly in old, ill, or young animals, fleas can remove so much blood through feeding that they can weaken the animal.

Fleas are prevalent throughout the United States. They prefer warm, humid conditions, so infestations are typically worst during mid to late summer and

early fall. In some parts of the country, they can be a significant problem year round. Even during the cooler months, fleas can survive very well indoors once an infestation has been established.

Ticks

Ticks are not insects, but they are closely related to spiders, scorpions, and mites. There are approximately 80 tick species found in the United States, but only a handful of them are of real concern to pets and people. Some of these include the brown dog tick (*Rhipicephalus sanguineus*), the deer tick (*Ixodes scapularis*), and the American dog tick (*Dermacentor variabilis*). The brown dog tick is the only species that can complete its entire lifecycle on a dog and can infest homes and kennels.

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Tick bites can be painful and irritating, but the real concern with ticks is the number of serious diseases they can transmit, such as Lyme disease, babesiosis, anaplasmosis, ehrlichiosis, and Rocky Mountain spotted fever. These diseases can cause significant illness and even death in both pets and people.

Ticks are found in virtually every region of the United States. They are most prevalent in the early spring and late fall, although some species are well adapted to temperature extremes and can be found any time of year. In general, however, they prefer dark, moist, brushy places in which to lay their eggs.

How Do I Know If My Pet Has Fleas and/or Ticks?

Larger tick species can typically be seen or felt in the hair coat, especially once they are engorged after

Preventive Care

feeding. Deer ticks, on the other hand, are very tiny—about the size of the head of a pin in some stages—and can be harder to see.

Repetitive scratching is a telltale sign that your pet may have fleas. Adult fleas can be identified on the pet, but fleas in other stages of their life cycle (eggs, larvae, and pupae) can be harder to find. Adult fleas are tiny and can be hard to see, but flea combs can be used to remove fleas as well as flea dirt. Flea dirt is essentially flea feces, which is digested blood. To check your pet for fleas, run a flea comb through your pet's fur and dump any hair and debris onto a white paper towel. Dampen it slightly with water. Any small, dark specks that stain the towel red are a clear indication your pet has fleas. Finally, excessive grooming is also a sign of a potential flea problem. Infested cats will groom themselves repeatedly in an effort to remove fleas.

How Do I Prevent Fleas?

There are many safe, effective, and easy to administer flea control products. These products are typically administered orally in tablet (or liquid) form or topically by applying the medication as a fluid directly to the animal's skin—generally between the shoulder blades or at the back of the neck. Some flea control products are only active against adult fleas, whereas other products can also target other stages of the flea life cycle, such as eggs and larvae. In some cases, your veterinarian may recommend more than one product in order to most effectively kill fleas and break the flea life cycle.

Once an infestation is established, fleas can be very difficult to get rid of. You may need to treat your pet repeatedly. In addition, fleas must be completely removed from the affected pet's environment. Therefore, all other animals in the house must also be treated with flea control products, and the house and yard may need to be treated as well.

Vacuuming rugs, throwing out old pet bedding, and laundering other items may also be recommended by your veterinarian to help remove fleas from your pet's environment.

How Do I Prevent Ticks?

There are many safe, effective, and easy to administer tick control products. Many of the major flea control products also have formulations that will help prevent ticks. These products are typically administered topically by applying the medication as a fluid directly to the animal's skin—generally between the shoulder blades or at the back of the neck.

Prevention also includes keeping pets out of “tick habitats,” such as heavily wooded areas or tall grass. As much as possible, create tick-free zones in your yard by keeping grass mown short and bushes cut back. Ticks like moist areas, so remove leaf litter from around your house. If necessary, you may need to treat your backyard with a pesticide to reduce the number of ticks.

Finally, make a habit of performing a “tick check” on your pet at least once a day, especially if he or she has any access to wooded or grassy areas where ticks may lurk. If you find a tick, grasp it with a pair of tweezers as close down to the mouthparts as you can reach. Exert a gentle, steady pressure until the tick lets go. There are also tick removal tools that are very easy to use. Never remove a tick with your bare fingers. Avoid using lighter fluid, matches, or other products that may irritate the skin or cause other injuries to your pet. When in doubt, ask your veterinary care team for assistance removing the tick.

NEVER use flea control products intended for dogs on cats. Some medications can be highly toxic to cats. Only use products on the species for which they are intended, and follow all label instructions.