

An Itchy Issue

DR RACHELE LOWE BVSc (HONS)



As our long summer days and balmy nights start to fade away and a winter chill sets in, many Sydney pet owners will be breathing a sigh of relief; Tick season has passed for another year. Phew! However, whilst many owners see winter as a time to relax and save a few dollars on the expensive treatments they apply so religiously in summer, what many forget is that these treatments are also protecting their pets from a far more persistent and irritating little parasite – THE FLEA! And this winter, as always, Sydney is gearing up for a population explosion of these pesky little parasites.

To help ensure your pet isn't one of those affected by these persistent (and seemingly indestructible!) little hitchhikers, we have teamed up with Mosman Veterinary Hospitals Dr Rachele Lowe to bring you our first ever 'Owners Guide to Fleas'. Enjoy!

GETTING TO KNOW YOUR ENEMY – WHAT IS A FLEA??

The most common flea found on domestic pets in Australia is the Cat Flea (*Ctenocephalides felis*). Do not let the name deceive you, though called 'Cat' Fleas these tiny critters affect dogs just as commonly as they do cats and are quite happy to live on either one of our furry friends! Cat Fleas measure 1.5 - 3mm, are reddish brown in color, and have 3 pairs of legs. They are amazing athletes and are able to jump as far as 150 x their own body length with ease! Fleas feed on blood and spend most of their life on an animal host. They feed often and most fleas cannot survive longer than a week without a blood meal.

THE FLEA BABY BOOM!

As far as population explosions go, Fleas have the edge on us by a mile! 1 adult female flea can produce 50 eggs per day - so if your pet has 20 fleas hidden in their coat this can mean a whopping 1000 new eggs making

their way into your house EVERY DAY! Fleas are master breeders and a basic understanding of their lifecycle can be a secret weapon when waging a war against these tiny critters in your own home.

There are 4 stages of the Flea Lifecycle: Eggs, Larvae, Pupae, and Adult Fleas:

- ① Eggs are laid on your pets coat and fall off into the environment. These tiny eggs are too small to be seen without a magnifying glass, and so go virtually unnoticed in our homes until they hatch into larvae.
- ② Larvae burrow their way into protected and shady spots in your home where they start to grow – most common hiding places for larvae can include in carpet fibers, skirting boards and in cracks between wooden floorboards.
- ③ Once mature, larvae become Pupa. It is at this stage that they build cocoons around themselves which they will remain in until they hatch as adult fleas. The cocoons that protect pupa are very sticky, and so pick up dust and debris from the environment and so remain very well camouflaged.
- ④ The final stage of the cycle is when the flea hatches from its cocoon and emerges to start its life as a brand new blood-sucking flea. First stop, Fido or Rover for breakfast!

Fleas are one species which have adapted brilliantly for survival. Immature fleas have the ability to delay hatching if there is no potential food source in the environment. Fleas will not hatch from their cocoons unless they are stimulated to do so by physical pressure, heat or carbon dioxide – meaning that if you are on holiday or the house is empty, they will simply wait until you and Fido arrive back home again!





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Fleas can remain safely cocooned for up to 4 months waiting for their next host to arrive on the scene, and during this time they are resistant to any insecticides applied to the environment. This is why Adult fleas can continue to emerge for up to 3 months after you have treated your house (and pet!) for fleas!

A WINTERTIME EPIDEMIC – WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR:

Dr Rachele Lowe from Mosman Veterinary Hospital on Sydney Lower North Shore sees hundreds of cats and dogs for itchy skin each year and says that fleas are far more common than people realize.

“I see cats and dogs every week in winter with fleas, and their owners are often completely unaware. So many people mistakenly believe that when the weather is colder, that fleas disappear and that they can stop using flea prevention. Unfortunately though, in today’s world where we have lovely warm houses and heating, it feels like summer year round indoors and so the flea lifecycle continues”.

Whilst many owner are aghast at the thought of their prized pooch or precious puss having fleas, Dr Rachele is keen to stress that they are very common. “Cats and dogs can pick up fleas from many different locations; from playing with another dog in the park, a visit to the grooming salon, a playdate with your friend’s new pet, or simply from your going on their daily roam or walk around the neighborhood.”

Scratching is the biggest clue that your pet may have fleas, and though animals with fleas can itch anywhere they will often focus their scratching and chewing

around the rump and base of the tail. If you notice your pet nibbling or scratching more than usual then it may be time to check your pet for fleas.

When examining your pet, don’t be surprised if you do not see live fleas. Fleas are fantastic at hide-and-seek and you often won’t see live adults. Instead, look for clues such as flea dirt. Gently part their hair and examine the skin underneath for little black specks at the base of the hairs. These specks are flea dirt (aka flea droppings!). If you brush some of this dirt onto a tissue or sheet of paper and then add a drop of water, the black specks will become red smudges as the digested blood is released. If you find flea dirt on your pet, even without seeing a live flea, then your pet has fleas and will need treatment.



Skin infection and hair loss due to flea allergy.

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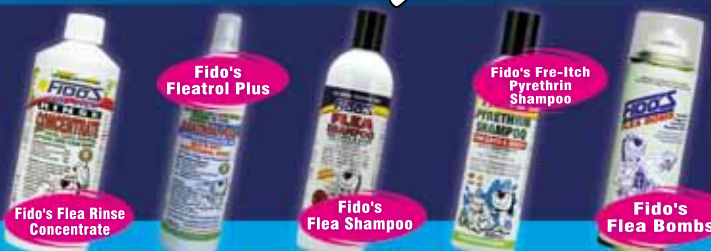
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MORE THAN JUST AN ITCH – THE SERIOUS SIDE TO FLEAS AND WHY THEY CAN BE A PROBLEM FOR YOU AND YOUR PET?

Apart from driving your furry friend mad with itchiness, fleas can cause several health problems for our pets, and for us as owners! These potential problems should serve as great motivators for keeping your pet and home flea free.

Pet Problems:

- **Flea Allergy** - Some pets are allergic to flea bites. If these pets are exposed to fleas they will groom or scratch excessively, pull out their hair, and can develop skin infections which need veterinary treatment.
- **Anemia** - Adult fleas feed on blood. In young, small, or debilitated animals with lots of fleas this can cause anemia which in some cases can be life threatening.
- **Tapeworms** - Cats and dogs become infected with tapeworm by eating infected fleas as they groom or nibble at itches. Any dog or cat with fleas is also very likely to have tapeworm.

Human Problems:

- **Flea Bites** - Cat fleas cannot live on humans as hosts, however they will bite people, and these bites – similar to mosquito bites – can be itchy, irritating, and have the potential for infection.
- **Tapeworm** - Children, all be it rarely, can become infected with tapeworm through ingesting infected fleas.
- **Cat Scratch Fever** - Fleas have been found to transmit the disease 'Cats Scratch Fever' between cats. Bites or scratches from a cat with infected fleas can transmit cat scratch fever to humans too. Cat scratch disease in people can cause swollen and tender lymph nodes, headache, backache, chills, and fever.

FIGHTING BACK - HOW DO YOU GET RID OF FLEAS ONCE YOUR PET HAS THEM?

Unfortunately there is no magic pill to rid you're your pet of fleas, successful flea control has 2 aspects which must be addressed if you are to succeed. Firstly fleas must be controlled on your pet and secondly fleas must be controlled in your pets environment.

Controlling fleas on your Pet is the first step. "There

are a huge array of flea products on the market for both cats and dogs." Explains Dr Rachele Lowe, "Monthly spot on's can work fantastically to rid your pet of fleas - some of these spot on's such as Frontline and Advantix can be used fortnightly in summer months to help control Ticks on your pet as well. Other monthly spot-on's will cover your pet for worms and heartworm too, eliminating the need for additional tablets. If you don't like topical treatments, there are also monthly chews and tablets available for dogs that swim alot, sprays, collars, or twice yearly injections for cats which can help break the flea lifecycle."

Selecting the right product for your pet depends on your individual circumstances, and getting expert advice is a great idea. Veterinary Clinics have highly trained nurses who are happy to offer free-of-charge advice on the best options for your pet. It is well worth taking advantage of these free services if you have a flea problem.



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AN ITCHY ISSUE CONTINUED

Once you have your pet flea free, the second (and equally as important!) step is to treat the environment. 95% of the flea population are in developmental stages in the environment. This means that if your pet has 5 adult fleas in their coat, there are already 95 more fleas growing in your carpets and floorboards ready to take their place in coming days! A number of different products are available to kill the stages of the flea lifecycle present in your home, such as;

- Flea bombs and Insecticide sprays
- Surface sprays such as Mortein or raid Raid which contain insect growth regulators for use around the house
- Products for your pet which contain a chitin synthesis inhibitor. Adult fleas which feed on the medicated animal produce eggs which are incapable of hatching to produce adult fleas. This will prevent environmental infestation from occurring so long as all animals in the house are treated.
- Insecticides applied by professional pest control operatives

When treating your house, always vacuum thoroughly first as the vibrations will encourage new fleas to emerge from their pupae which can then be killed by the insecticide. Initially go over the whole house with the treatment, then return and concentrate on the hotspots – namely your cats favorite dozing spots, such as soft furnishings, bedding and chairs. Also pay attention to the sheltered areas favoured by flea Larvae, such as underneath furniture, along skirting boards, and in the cracks of floorboards. Be sure to lift furniture and move cushions to give everywhere a good spray. Always read product labels carefully and apply only as instructed.

Once you have treated the house, your pets bedding should be frequently washed at high temperatures or replaced regularly. Vacuuming regularly also plays a crucial part in removing eggs, larvae, and pupae from the house ongoing. Be sure to throw out or empty the vacuum cleaner after every session, as eggs and larvae can continue to develop inside here.

For those owners with a seemingly unsolvable Flea Problem Dr Rachele Lowe offers these tips:

- Make sure that you use a product or combination of products on your pet which tackle all stages of the flea lifecycle. If certain stages are forgotten, your flea control is less likely to be successful.
- Buy good quality products – whilst flea control can be expensive, saving a few dollars may cost you a lot more in the long run as cheaper ‘own-brand’ treatments are often less effective than veterinary grade products. It is worth buying the best product you can afford as you really will get what you pay for.
- Follow the instructions – many owners with flea ‘problems’ spend lots of money trying out numerous products when they simply aren’t applying them correctly! Make sure you follow the directions well.
- Find out if your pet can swim or bathe with the product on, and if so, how often. Some products are water sensitive.
- Keep up to date – once your pet is flea free, don’t be tempted to skip a month or two. It is far easier to remain flea free than to eliminate a flea problem.
- Make sure you are treating EVERY animal in the house. If you treat the dog but not the cat, or treat them at different times, you may find they are simply passing the problem back and forth between each other. Be mindful of using cat-friendly products if you have cats in the house, as some dog flea products can be poisonous to cats.

"Fleas are one of the most upsetting topics a dog owner has to discuss" concludes Dr Lowe. "So many owners think that if their pet has fleas it means they keep a dirty house or that they are a negligent owner. This simply isn't the case. Fleas are a fact of life for modern-day pet owners, but with a little guidance they are a very solvable problem, and there's no need for owners – or their pets – to loose sleep over them this winter".

COMMON MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT FLEAS AND FLEA TREATMENTS:

'Dogs and cats don't get fleas in winter.' MYTH. Whilst it is true that warm and humid conditions speed up the flea lifecycle, the development of well insulated housing with heating means that indoors the conditions are constantly warm year round. This enables the flea lifecycle to continue, thus year round flea control IS necessary if you want to keep your pet itch free.

'Dogs can't catch fleas from cats.' MYTH The most common flea seen on cats and dogs is the 'Cat Flea. This breed of flea is not species specific and will happily live on cats and dogs, so they certainly can spread from your dog to your cat. Treating all animals in the house is vital.

'Some fleas have now become resistant to the drugs used in flea preventatives. There are now a new breed of super-fleas that are impossible to kill.' MYTH.

There is no evidence of fleas developing significant resistance to insecticides. Most of the large drug companies have flea susceptibility monitoring programs in which they test their drugs against flea populations to ensure that they still work. To date no resistance has been found. Apparent failure of treatment is almost always due to improper use of the product, inadequate treatment of the home, or exposure to other infested environments.

'Herbal flea remedies work just as well as chemical preventatives.' MYTH. The effectiveness of most herbal remedies in treating and preventing fleas is speculative and these alternative treatments are often ineffective. Some can even be dangerous for your pets; garlic is well known for causing anemia in both dogs and cats which can be life threatening, whilst Pennyroyal is toxic and can kill dogs and cats when ingested in even small quantities. Owners should always discuss herbal remedies with their veterinarian prior to use for the safety of their pet.

'Indoor pets don't need to be treated for fleas.' MYTH. Very few pets are truly 'indoors only'. Indoors dogs will often visit cafes or grooming parlors with their owners, will have play dates with friends dogs, or will be taken out for walks in the park, during which they are commonly exposed to other animals from which they can pick up fleas. Similarly indoors cats will often have occasional visits to the vets, the groomers, or to catteries when their owner is away. It is during these little trips out that they can pick up fleas and bring them back into the home environment. All pets should be kept on flea prevention to prevent them from acquiring fleas. Even 'indoors pets' are exposed at one time or another.

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Dr Rachele Lowe BVSc (Hons) graduated from Sydney University in 1990 with Honors. Rachele has worked in general practice for 22 years, and has special interests in orthopedic and soft tissue surgery, dentistry and animal behavior. Rachele is an accomplished author. Her 1st book on puppy care was published in 2009 and she is currently writing her second book on canine behavior. Rachele is a regular advisor for the Sunrise show on Channel 7, and also the Veterinary Editor for New Idea magazine. Dr Rachele is a principal of Mosman Veterinary Hospital on Sydney's lower north shore, and can be found there most days treating her canine and feline patients.

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