



# FLEA CONTROL

Flea bites can cause irritation and serious allergic reactions in animals and humans. The most common flea found in homes, the cat flea (*Ctenocephalides felis*), can transmit tapeworms, bubonic plague, and murine typhus. Visitors can bring in adult fleas on their clothing without realizing it. Urban wildlife such as squirrels, birds, and feral cats can be a source of fleas as well.

## Description

Adult cat fleas are small (1/16 inch long), oval, wingless, reddish-brown to black insects with powerful hind legs.

## Life Cycle

After mating and feeding, adult females lay small, white eggs that fall into cracks, crevices, carpet, bedding, or lawn covering. A mature female can lay up to 25 eggs every day for three weeks.

Within 48 hours, wormlike larvae hatch. Larvae feed primarily on "flea dirt" (adult flea feces, which is relatively undigested dried blood) that falls from the host's fur.

In 8 to 24 days, the larvae spin cocoons in which they will pupate into adults. Under optimal conditions, new adults are ready to emerge within two weeks, but they can remain in their cocoons for up to a year. Vibrations stimulate them to emerge and look for a blood meal. Adults can live about a month without a meal and up to six months with one meal.

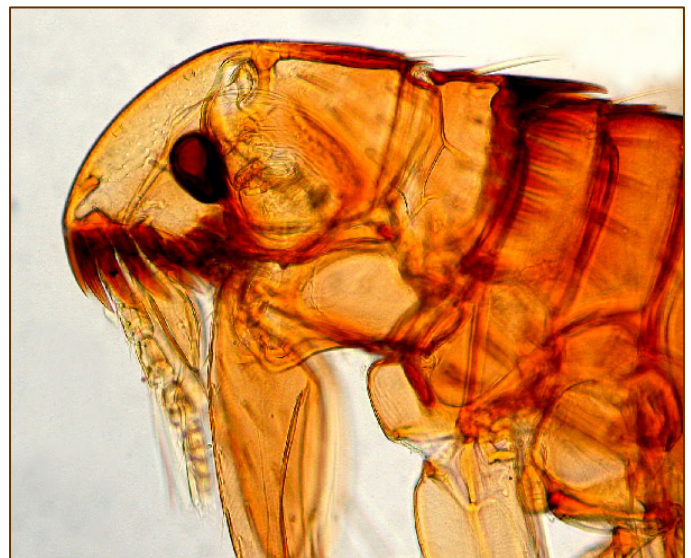
These variations in flea development time account for the sudden appearance of large numbers of adult fleas in "flea season," usually in the late

summer and early fall. The flea population has been building up all year long in the form of eggs, larvae, and pupae (cocoons). But, rapid development into biting adults cannot be completed until the temperature and humidity are optimal and other cues signal adults to emerge.

## Monitoring

If pets are kept in the house, frequently check their bodies and the areas around their cages. It is important to also check places where animals might find harborage—such as attics, basements, crawlspaces, eaves, roof structures, and shrubs near buildings.

Long, white athletic socks worn over the shoes and trouser legs allow you to easily see and count adult fleas as you walk through an infested area.



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## *Flea Control Continued*

### **Cultural Methods**

Vacuuming on a regular basis will help keep developing flea populations low. Flea larvae are likely to escape capture in carpet because they coil themselves around the fibers. Vibrations caused by vacuuming will also stimulate new adult fleas to emerge from their cocoons. These new adults will then be captured in the next vacuuming.

Dust in the vacuum bag will kill most fleas by blocking their breathing apparatus. But to be sure, vacuum up a tablespoon of cornstarch. Getting the cornstarch into the vacuum bag will essentially “choke” the life out of the fleas. Immediately dispose of the used vacuum bag. Badly infested areas should be vacuumed every day. Wash any removable floor coverings, such as rugs.

Severe infestations may require the services of a steam-cleaning firm. This process kills adult and larval fleas and probably some eggs as well. Remaining eggs will hatch a day or two after the cleaning. Continue vacuuming to remove these last few fleas.

Comb pets with a flea comb, dropping fleas and eggs into soapy water. Regularly wash pet bedding. As for ultrasonic flea collars, they are completely ineffective.



### **Pesticides**

Many products are available to treat for fleas in the home and to treat pets. Probably the most effective treatment to prevent fleas in the home is to treat the pets with a product such as Frontline<sup>®</sup>, Top Spot<sup>®</sup>, Program<sup>®</sup>, Proban<sup>®</sup>, Pro-spot<sup>®</sup>, or Advantage<sup>®</sup>. These treatments make your pet unsuitable for fleas to complete their life cycle.