

Factsheet 4 - Fleas



"Big fleas have little fleas upon their backs to bite 'em; whilst little fleas have lesser fleas and so ad infinitum"

Fleas are a common problem in cats and dogs and can cause a lot of discomfort which may not get noticed immediately. Therefore most pets will need a helping hand at some stage. However not all pets will need the same treatment and methods of control, and a lot of time and money can be wasted without getting anywhere.

Therefore, it helps to know something about fleas in order to be the most effective in getting rid of them!

Facts to Know about Fleas

- There are different types, but most commonly are the cat flea and the dog flea.
- Fleas can pass between different species of animals; hence the hedgehog gets the blame!
- Fleas can hop! They can jump up to 34 cm and over a distance of about 1 metre
- It is the female flea you need to watch: she lays 40 eggs a day, for up to 1 month
- Most eggs are laid when the animal is resting, so bedding becomes the main problem
- The female flea drinks 15x her weight in blood each day
- Cats can have fleas on them all the time; dogs tend only to have them when the flea wants to feed.
- Eggs and pupae (the immature fleas) like the dark and get deep into carpets
- Fleas hatch when they detect vibration, warmth and carbon dioxide - that is when a cat or dog comes sniffing around.
- The flea skeleton consists of a substance called *chitin* which can be hindered by certain products.
- Fleas have a simple nervous system which is where most products attempt to work

- Cats and dogs that are allergic to fleas rarely have fleas on them: They are so itchy that the pet gnaws and grooms them away. Often the only sign is a bald patch or an area of broken hairs that are coarse to touch

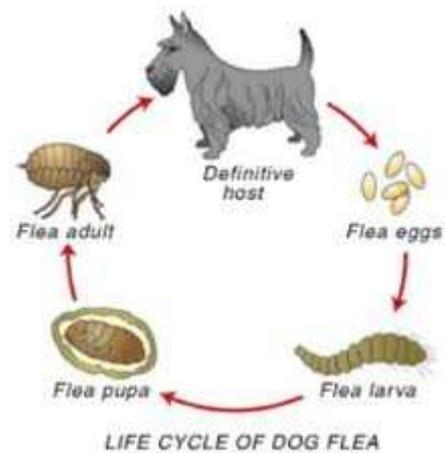
Knowing the above can help in deciding how to tackle a flea problem. There are two approaches:

- To control an existing problem
- To prevent a flea problem in the first place

How Flea Products Work

There are several ways flea products can work. The adult flea is the most vulnerable, whilst the egg is the most resistant, to treatment. Sometimes it is necessary to make a two-pronged attack on both stages of their life cycle.

ADULT FLEA KILLERS. Historically the *adulticide* was all that was available. Unfortunately the original ones (*organophosphates*) were also toxic to the pet and the owner as they get absorbed through the skin and membranes into the body. Besides, they were not particularly effective. Nonetheless they are still widely available from pet shops and supermarkets because they are cheap and do not have a prescription license. They take many forms: collars, powders, aerosol sprays and baths. The fact that they can be purchased by anybody means that they cannot be very strong, and typically they may only work for a couple of weeks and only slow the rate at which the fleas breed rather than stop them completely. To achieve better control and to win the war against fleas needs proper medicines and these require a prescription. The products are much safer and more effective and well worth the initial expense. Examples are **Efipro®**, and **Stronghold®**. At last we now have products that really do work completely without making the pet ill.



ENVIRONMENTAL agents attempt to kill the eggs and larvae - not an easy task. Again, organophosphates can be used, but new products work by blocking larval development making them very safe as they do not affect mammal tissue. An example is **Indorex®**.

STERILISERS are a novel way of preventing a flea outbreak. They DO NOT kill the flea. Instead they sterilise them and prevent the eggs and larvae from developing. These products may be more appropriate for some pets so ask one of our vets or nurses for advice.

Working out What to Do

- Decide if you have a problem or just want to prevent a problem. If it is severe then you will need to use environmental agents as well. Remember that eggs and larvae will be in the carpets and bedding so to break the cycle of re-infestation these will need to be treated too.
- Consider how your pet would respond to various types of treatment: sprays, collars, shampoos, tablets. Also how easy will it be for you to give the treatment?
- Does your pet go swimming or get bathed a lot? **Efipro®** will still work after contact with water.
- Consider safety, both for your pet and yourself. Be particularly careful about what you use if there are children around or if the pet is very young. Avoid organophosphates as they can be absorbed and can accumulate over time.
- Consider costs - having a lot of pets may mean forking out a lot of money. Ask for advice if you are on a budget, as we will stop you spending money on unnecessary products. Remember, though, that cheap products that don't work or need to be bought more frequently will cost more in the long run than one good bottle of a product that will last a long time.
- Please consider the environment. Some products can do a lot of damage. Again, it is the organophosphate range of goods that are the worst. Always avoid contaminating fish and ponds whatever the product.
- Stronghold® also contains a round-wormer and is also affective against fox mange which is a very common problem in this area, so it may be worth asking for this product for its greater protection.

