

# Fleas and ticks

Ticks are small spider-like acarids and fleas are insects, but these two tiny creatures have at least one thing in common – they are both parasites that feed on your dog's or cat's blood and can cause a lot of discomfort and more serious health problems.

Flea bites may go unnoticed on some pets, cause slight irritation in others and produce extensive itching, red lesions, hair loss and even ulcers in those animals with flea allergy dermatitis, which is the result of extreme sensitivity to flea saliva. Severe flea infestations can cause anaemia, especially in puppies and kittens. Fleas can also transmit several diseases, as well as tapeworm. The Paralysis Tick and the Brown Dog Tick are both seen in many parts of Australia, but it is the Paralysis Tick which is by far the most dangerous for dogs and cats, and can cause death in a very short time if your pet develops symptoms and is left untreated. Ticks can also be "vectors" or carriers of a number of bacterial diseases.



## About fleas...



Adult fleas are wingless insects, generally smaller than a sesame seed, which feed on the blood of animals. Their proportionately enlarged back pair of legs gives them an extraordinary jumping ability. Hanging on to your pet's fur with their claws, their needle-like mouth parts bite through the skin to suck up blood – in quantities of up to 15 times their body weight daily in the case of female cat fleas.

If one flea finds your dog or cat an attractive food source, you can be sure that other fleas will too! They mate, with females laying 30–50 eggs per day. These eggs will drop to the ground within 8 hours and, as soon as 2 days later flea larvae will hatch and hide in dark places on the ground, in carpets or upholstery. After about a week of feeding on adult flea droppings, crumbs, flakes of skin, etc., the larvae spin cocoons to become pupae. The pupae can remain in this stage for very long periods of time. The cycle continues when, as soon as a week or so later, the pupae develop into adult fleas and emerge from their cocoons when they sense that a dog or cat, or other animal host, is near. The cycle – which can take as little as 12 days or as long as 180 days – can then begin again.

## ...And ticks



Ticks are wingless creatures that live exclusively on the blood of animals for three of the four stages of their life cycle. They are equipped with an apparatus called Haller's organ which senses heat, carbon dioxide and other stimuli to allow the ticks to locate the presence of an animal food source. Once found, they crawl on and embed their mouth parts into the animal's skin and proceed to suck up its blood.

With paralysis ticks, the most dangerous, the engorging adult female tick (pictured) injects a toxin that causes paralysis seen as a variety of presentations, but usually starts with weakness of the hindquarters that progresses to total paralysis of all four legs. Other typical early signs include an altered meow or bark and vomiting. With time, the muscles of the throat and chest become affected, causing serious problems with breathing and swallowing. Death can occur in untreated animals as little as 24 hours after symptoms commence.

The paralysis tick season varies depending on where you live, with ticks requiring humidity and mild weather to develop. In paralysis tick-infested areas, you should inspect your pet daily for ticks, especially if they have been outside in areas where there is bush or tall grass. A thorough combing within 4 to 6 hours of exposure to such environments can help prevent ticks from attaching themselves to feast on your pet. Should you find a tick, it should be removed immediately, as the longer it is attached to its host, the greater the chance for paralysis. Use finger-nails, tweezers or a tick-removing device to grasp the tick as close to the dog or cat's skin as possible and pull the tick out in one firm, steady motion. Always check if there is more than just one tick. To dispose of the tick, wrap it in several tissues and flush it down the toilet. Take your pet to the vet immediately if you are unable to remove the tick, it is inaccessible, or if your dog or cat is showing any symptoms of tick paralysis. Early treatment is vital for their best chance of survival.



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## Controlling fleas and ticks

The best way to control flea problems is to prevent them from happening in the first place. Fortunately, developments in veterinary parasite control in recent years have made the twofold goal of eliminating fleas on pets and preventing further infestations much easier to achieve. Available for both dogs and cats, new insecticides and insect growth regulators in easy-to-use topical or oral forms not only eliminate any existing fleas, but also work long-term to prevent future infestations. This is accomplished either by killing the parasites before they can reproduce or by preventing their eggs from developing into normal adult fleas. Consult your veterinarian for advice about the proper product for your pet. Furthermore, thorough daily vacuuming of high-traffic areas and frequent washing of your pet's bedding will also go a long way in reducing the flea population in your home.

Some of the same types of topical or oral products used to control flea infestation are also effective against ticks. Tick collars are also available. Such treatments should be combined with daily examinations and tick removal for those pets, especially dogs, who are frequently outdoors in areas with high tick populations. Ask your veterinarian for information about the situation in your locality. Clearing long grasses and removing leaves, grass clippings and other organic debris will also help reduce the presence of ticks by disturbing their natural outdoor habitats.

## When a parasite picks your pet for a meal

If, despite your best efforts at control, you find that fleas or ticks have crawled (or jumped) on board your pet, you will have to use a product that will kill and/or repel the parasites. These include once-a-month topical treatments, sprays, oral medication, shampoos, collars and, to combat fleas, injectable medication. Once again, you should ask your veterinarian for advice about what the most appropriate product for your pet is. And remember, it is perfectly normal to see live fleas or ticks on a pet immediately after a topical treatment, spray, shampoo, collar, etc. is applied. Many believe that this means the product is not working, but the fleas or ticks have to fully absorb the product before they will be affected, which may take from a few hours to a few days.



## Facts about fleas

- Worldwide, there are about 3,000 different types of fleas, but the cat flea (*Ctenocephalides felis*) is the most common to be found on dogs and cats.
- Adult fleas can jump 600 times an hour. Each jump, in terms of the flea's size, is the equivalent of a person clearing a 50-storey building.
- The record jump for a flea (usually 2–8 mm long) is 33 cm.
- In just 30 days, 25 adult female fleas can multiply to 250,000 fleas.

## Tips about ticks

- A female tick can lay up to 3,000 eggs.
- Except for eggs, ticks need a blood meal to progress to the next stage of their life cycle.
- Some ticks can live for more than a year without a meal.
- The time from attachment of a paralysis tick to the onset of symptoms can be just a few days.

