

# Fleas

## Fact Sheet

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### **What are fleas?**

Fleas are small, black to brownish-black wingless insects about 1/8 “ long with small sucking mouth parts. They have well-developed legs that allow them to be great jumpers. Fleas bite animals and humans and the bite can cause severe itching.

### **What is the life cycle of a flea?**

A female flea will lay 4 to 8 eggs after each blood meal, and can usually lay several hundred eggs during her adult life. The eggs are very small and get deposited on the body, bedding or nest of the host. The eggs do not adhere well to the surface they are laid on so they may fall off into crevices in the floor, carpeting, sofas or pet bedding where they usually hatch in 10 days or less. The egg hatches into a worm or larvae about 1/4 “ long that is whitish with a brownish head. After a week to 2 months, the larvae spin a cocoon. It remains in the pupal period for a week or two, sometimes longer. The adult flea may remain in the cocoon for a long time until vibrations indicate there may be a host (human or animal) around. This vibration will cause it to become active and go in search of a blood meal. A person can walk into a home that had been infested with fleas but not occupied for months and get attacked by fleas that are just leaving the cocoon because there were motivated to get going by vibrations in the house.

### **What are the symptoms of fleabites?**

Some people react severely to fleabites while others hardly notice them. Fleas most often bite people around the legs and ankles, and there are usually 2 or 3 bites in a row. The bites are felt immediately, but tend to become increasingly irritating, and are frequently sore for as long as a week. Repeated bites may produce a generalized rash. The bites can be very itchy.

### **What about disease transmission?**

A flea can transmit disease organisms. If fleas infest an animal such as a rat that is carrying disease, the disease can be spread to any human or other animal that the infesting fleas bite. This is highly unlikely to happen in the United States but still must be considered when dealing with the urgency of treating a flea infestation.

### **How are infestations spread?**

Fleas are more abundant in relatively humid areas. They are particularly numerous during years of greatest rainfall and humidity. Many times fleas infest a cat or a dog. The animal must be excluded from the home or properly treated for the fleas. The fleas will go wherever the infested animal goes but the eggs can get into animal bedding and other areas of the home. These eggs will hatch 1 week to 2 months after they are laid. Fleas often become established in the lawns of heavily infested residences. Fleas can jump vertically for 5 or 6 inches, and can attach themselves to skin or clothing.

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### **How do you get rid of fleas?**

Successful flea control must include not only the treatment of infested animals, but also thorough treatment of the entire infested premises. Pets can, of course, be sent to the veterinarian for treatment. In that case, they should not be allowed to return until the fleas have been controlled in the infested source area. Pets can also be reinfested if they are allowed to roam and come in contact with another infested animal or an infested area.

- **Treatment of pets.** There are dusts, sprays, pills and collars that you can use to treat your pet. It is best to consult your veterinarian before purchasing a product. It is very important to read and carefully follow the instructions on the label prior to using.
- **Treatment of premises.** For best results, it is necessary to clean, launder, and apply an insecticide. Spraying an insecticide alone will probably not get rid of the problem. Fleas are most concentrated in and around places where animals sleep or rest. Infested animal bedding should be laundered in hot, soapy water. Animal bedding should not be left unwashed for long periods of time while the animals are away, such as during a vacation. Accumulation of lint and dust can contain flea eggs, larvae, and pupae that should be removed with a vacuum cleaner. Vacuum all areas of the house including baseboards, moldings, bed frames, floor areas and rugs with a vacuum cleaner that has a disposable bag. Seal the disposable vacuum cleaner bag securely in two plastic bags and discard it. Clear and clean all floors, even closets. Mop all tile, vinyl and concrete floors after sweeping or vacuuming. Remove anything that should not come in contact with an insecticide such as pillows, toys, fish, food, water dishes, etc. Once everything is cleaned, your home is ready for treatment with an insecticide. You can buy your own products at the store. Be sure to read the instructions and precautions prior to purchasing the product. Once you decide on a product, carefully follow all instructions for application and pay close attention to precautions necessary to protect yourself, your family members and your pets. If you do not feel comfortable applying the insecticide yourself, there are many knowledgeable licensed pest control operators listed in the yellow pages of your phone book. Call them for help in dealing with your flea problem.
- **Treatment of the yard.** Fleas sometimes will live in your yard and will reinfest your pets or bite you when you or your pets go outside. Yards can be treated with an insecticide applied through a hose attachment. Pay special attention to the lawn. Fleas are also found around garbage cans. Again, be sure to read the instructions and precautions prior to purchasing the product. Once you decide on a product, carefully follow all instructions for application and pay close attention to precautions necessary to protect yourself, your family members and your pets. Call a licensed pest control operator if you need help getting rid of the fleas.

### **Treatment of symptoms**

Fleabites can itch and scratching the bites can cause the skin to become raw and open to infection. There are topical and oral treatments available over the counter that may provide relief. Check with your physician for further information.

### **What can be done to reduce the chances of getting fleas?**

- Check with your veterinarian about flea collars and other ways to keep fleas away from your pet
- Wash a pet's bedding often, especially prior to leaving on vacation with your pet
- Keep your home cleaned and vacuumed
- If you do notice fleas, take immediate steps to eliminate them as listed in the above information.

### **Note from MMWR Vol. 60/No. 7 Feb 25, 2011**

Sleeping in the same bed with dogs has been associated with plague in enzootic areas (4). Plague patients with no history of exposure to rodents can be infected by *Y. pestis* if their pets carry infected rodent fleas into the home. Veterinarians always should recommend flea control to dog and cat owners.