

It's Flea Season Again. Are You Ready for Battle?

Every year you watch helplessly as fleas torment your pet and drive you crazy. Besides being downright annoying, the pesky insects can do plenty of harm to your pet. They can cause allergies, skin infections, anemia, and even tapeworm infestations.

Feel like giving up? Feel like dousing your pet with every pesticidal shampoo, dip, spray, powder, or collar on the shelf? Don't do either. Instead, try this safe, effective flea-control regimen.

Know Your Opponent

Fleas can vary their egg-to-adult life cycle anywhere from 18 days to 20 months, depending on how hot and humid it is. They may also spend as little as 10% of their lives on your pet. Put the two together, and you'll realize that soon after you rid your pet of fleas, more of the little pests will hop onto its fur and you'll be back to square one. The solution? Treat the home as well as the animal.

Clean Your Quarters

Begin with a thorough cleaning, which will eliminate most of the eggs and adult fleas lurking in your home. Wash all pet bedding in hot, soapy water. Mop hard floors. Vacuum everywhere--carpets, upholstery, drapes, corners, crevices. Seal the vacuum cleaner bag immediately in a plastic bag. Once you start, don't let up or you'll lose ground! Vacuum and clean once a week until you begin to see results. Then you can do it less frequently.

Commission New Weaponry

If you have a heavy infestation, apply an environmental insecticide after vacuuming. You can use a fogger "bomb," but a pump spray is better for all but extreme infestations, since it will allow you to apply insecticide only where your pet sleeps and plays. Don't apply it to your pet! Products that kill developing fleas (called insect growth regulators) are the safest and most effective--look for the word "methoprene" on the label. Follow directions to see how often you can apply it.

Liberate Your Pet

On the same day you first vacuum and clean, shampoo your pet with a non-medicated product or mildly medicated "flea" shampoo to rid the pet of fleas. After that, use a flea comb (available in most pet supply stores) on a daily basis. Dip it in a dish of soapy water after each stroke to drown the fleas. Shampoo the animal periodically according to labeling instructions, and keep grooming daily with the flea comb. You'll quickly begin to see results.

Add More Weaponry

For most infestations, the cleaning/shampoo/flea comb system is all you'll need to achieve flea control. If your problem is severe (or if you can't shampoo your cat without a major fight), you can add other non-pesticidal alternatives to your program. Many pet owners swear by brewer's yeast (added to the pet's food in small dosages), or prefer to rub diluted oils or herbal powders into the animal's fur. If you decide to use a pesticide, products containing "pyrethrums" are the safest. Consult your veterinarian about prescription flea medications such as Advantage, Frontline or Revolution.

Heed These Warnings

If they are misused, pesticides can sicken or kill your pet. If you feel you must use a pesticidal product, whether it's a shampoo, dip, spray, powder, or collar, ALWAYS read the label and follow directions. NEVER use pesticides (including flea collars) on kittens and puppies or old, sick, pregnant, or heartworm-infected animals. And as a rule of thumb, use only one pesticide at a time on your pet.