



Fleas are the most common external parasite of dogs (and cats...and even some wildlife!). Even the best-kept dogs can potentially be infested with fleas at some time in their life, especially if they regularly leave their property.

Left untreated the infestation quickly becomes a much bigger problem. A flea infestation can also lead to tapeworm infection, anaemia (low red cells in the blood) and skin conditions such as flea allergy dermatitis.

But I Bathed the dog.....my dog is Clean....

Many dog owners think that because they have never seen a flea on their dog, that they could not possibly have a problem. Alternatively, if they have seen a flea or two, that merely bathing their dog will solve the problem of fleas. This is not true. To understand how to keep on top of fleas, you first need to understand how their lifecycle works.

Fleas are a little bit like a mosquito; they feed on blood. Without a meal of blood, they are unable to mature and lay their eggs. So to the flea, your immaculately groomed pet is simply a moving restaurant – they jump on, have a feed, and then fall off, lay their eggs and die.

The majority of the flea lifecycle takes place AWAY from the dog – in the bedding, kennel, garden, or even in the carpet of your house if your dogs are allowed inside. So what you see on the dog is only the tip of the flea iceberg.

So how Does my dog get Fleas in the First Place?

Even if you believe your home is entirely flea-free, your pets can still become infested if fleas are brought onto the property. If you or your neighbours have pet cats who wander the neighbourhood, they could easily pick up a few fleas and bring them onto your property.

The same applies to wild rabbits in rural and semi-rural areas. Even using garden products such as straw can potentially be a source of fleas. Dogs, cats and rabbits all share the same fleas!

Visiting dogs that come for a play date or for a mating (if you are a breeder) are another possible source of contamination. Your dog may also pick up fleas when off your property (at the park, at an agricultural show, at a trial or event, or when visiting other people's homes) and bring them home.

What Happens Once the Flea is on the dog?

Once on the dog, the flea will usually head towards the rear of the dog, often spending most of the time in the hair just above the base of the tail. This is why your vet will most likely suspect flea allergy if your dog is biting and chewing at this area. It is also the best place to look for fleas, or in the less hairy parts of the dog such as the belly area or inside the thighs.

Although fleas can be seen with the naked eye, they are tiny and 'photo-phobic' – which means that they don't like the light. If you part your dog's hair, they will quickly scurry back into darker hair-covered areas, sometimes making them hard to see. Often the only thing you will see is 'flea-dirt'. This is simply the waste matter the flea passes out after digesting its meal. Flea dirt looks like regular grains of dark dirt in the coat, but if you wet it, it dissolves and turns a reddish colour because it contains digested blood.

If you find flea dirt, there are fleas.....whether you can see them or not!

When feeding, the flea will suck blood from the dog, injecting saliva as they do it. This flea saliva acts to slow the clotting of the blood and can cause quite severe allergic reactions in some dogs. Allergic dogs will quickly start to bite and scratch at themselves – similar to a person who is allergic to mosquito bites. This biting and scratching causes damage to the skin and coat and can lead to coat loss and bald patches, dermatitis, and skin infections.



Once the flea has had its meal of blood, it can start to lay eggs. Each flea can lay hundreds of eggs. With a tough outer coating, these eggs can survive in the environment for quite a long time (even years) and are quite hard to kill.

Because the egg-laying fleas and the eggs drop off the dog wherever it happens to be, common places for egg infestation are the dog's bedding, favourite resting areas, and kennels.

Flea eggs hatch when the temperature and humidity are right. Hatching can also be triggered by vibration. This explains why people who move into an empty house that has previously had pets often end up with flea bites on their legs – their movement triggers the eggs to hatch. The fleas have no pets to jump onto, and end up biting the humans instead!

Flea eggs hatch into larva (plural – larvae) which look similar to a microscopic maggot. They are not as tough as the eggs and need warm, humid conditions to mature.

The larvae then spin a little cocoon for themselves and turn into the next lifecycle stage – the pupae. The pupae can survive for months before hatching into adult fleas, so even if you think you have gotten rid of all the adult fleas, you will still have pupae in the environment waiting to hatch when the conditions are right.

How Long Does the Flea Lifecycle Take?

The entire flea lifecycle – from adult to eggs to adult can take as little as two weeks in warm, humid weather, meaning one flea can turn into hundreds..... can turn into thousands in under a month!

That is why flea problems tend to be worst in the spring and summer months when the weather is just right. At other times of the year, especially in the colder areas of Victoria, the lifecycle will take longer.

So what should I do to keep my dogs flea free?

Given the rough estimation that adult fleas represent only 5% of the flea problem on the dog, the only way to be successful in controlling fleas is to address the environmental infestation as well as any fleas seen on the dog.

In the past, people used flea combs to remove the adult fleas from their dog's coats, or bathed them in flea shampoo or flea rinse (often containing quite toxic ingredients) to try to address their flea problems.

These strategies worked well to remove the adult fleas on the animal at that moment in time but did nothing to address the environmental contamination. It would not be very long before the dog went back to its bed or kennel and had newly hatched fleas climb on board.

Regularly vacuuming carpets can help to remove eggs. However, it is essential to remember the eggs will still be alive in the vacuum bag, and this needs to be disposed of carefully – not emptied onto the garden!

Regularly washing dog blankets and bedding in hot water (>60°C) for more than 10 minutes can also reduce the flea burden.

If your flea problem is particularly bad, replacing all of your pet's bedding is another step that can be taken. You can also avoid giving your dog access to areas such as under the house where the humidity and temperature are right for a fast flea lifecycle but where cleaning is almost impossible. These days there are many 'spot-on' products that not only kill the fleas on the dog when applied but go on working to kill fleas for up to a month.





This can work quite well as you are using the dog to clean the environment – the eggs hatch, the fleas jump on the treated dog and die, so no new eggs are laid.

The environmental store of eggs gradually all hatch and you end up with reduced environmental contamination. Some products have an added ingredient that also stops the eggs from hatching. The product crystallizes, and small crystals fall off wherever the dog spends time causing any eggs in that location to become sterile.

You will need to talk to your veterinarian to determine the flea control product most suited to your pet and your lifestyle. If you regularly travel with your pet (such as to events or shows), if your pet is likely to be washed frequently, or you have a multi-pet household, the best-suited product may vary.

Most products available today treat a variety of parasites in one treatment, so you also need to make sure you are using the right one and not doubling up.

If you have a dog of a Collie, or Collie-type breed (breeds that have a known sensitivity to one of the commonly-used ingredients in these products), it is vital that you get advice from your vet as to which products are safe to use.

Finally, you need to make sure that you don't become complacent. Just because you have never had a flea problem before, does not mean that your pet is not at risk.

