



Always consult with a veterinarian that you feel comfortable with before diagnosing or treating any disease on your own. This information is for reference only.

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Fleas

Issue Description

Fleas are small (1/16 to 1/8-inch (1.5 to 3.3 mm) long), agile, usually dark colored (for example, the reddish-brown of the cat flea), wingless insects with tube-like mouth-parts adapted to feeding on the blood of their hosts. Their bodies are laterally compressed (human anatomical terms), permitting easy movement through the hairs or feathers on the host's body (or in the case of humans, under clothes). Their legs are long, the hind pair well adapted for jumping (vertically up to seven inches (18 cm); horizontally thirteen inches (33 cm)) - around 200 times their own body length, making the flea one of the best jumpers of all known animals (in comparison to body size), second only to the frog hopper.

The flea body is hard, polished, and covered with many hairs and short spines directed backward, which also assists its movements on the host. Its tough body is able to withstand great pressure, likely an adaptation to survive scratching etc. Even hard squeezing between the fingers is normally insufficient to kill the flea; it may be necessary to capture them with adhesive tape, crush them between the fingernails, roll them between the fingers, or put them in a fire-safe area and burn them with match or lighter. They can also be drowned.

Fleas lay tiny white oval shaped eggs. Their larvae are small and pale with bristles covering their worm-like body. They are without eyes, and have mouth-parts adapted to chewing. While the adult flea's diet consists solely of blood, the larvae feed on various organic matter, including the feces of mature fleas. In the pupal phase the larvae are enclosed in a silken, debris-covered cocoon.

Symptoms

When keeping an eye out for indications that your dog is suffering from fleas, there are a number of warning signs that you can look for. Incessant scratching and biting are two of the most commonly exhibited symptoms when dogs are troubled by fleas. Often these behaviors will be directed predominantly at areas such as the head, neck, and around the tail, as these are the places where fleas and their bites tend to be concentrated.

Your dog's skin may become red and inflamed as a result of the irritation caused by flea bites and the constant scratching and biting. When your dog is suffering from a flea infestation, you may also be able to find more direct evidence of the presence of these annoying insects. Flea dirt may be visible on your pet's skin, on its bedding, or in other areas around the household. Flea dirt looks like tiny dark specks and is actually a combination of dried blood and flea debris. In addition to flea dirt, the fleas themselves may be visible in your dog's coat. You can check for fleas by combing carefully through your dog's fur. If you see tiny black insects scurrying for cover, you will have confirmed a flea infestation.

Some dogs are actually allergic to flea saliva and develop a condition called flea allergy dermatitis. The symptoms displayed by a dog with this hypersensitivity are similar to those exhibited by a non-allergic dog, but are much more pronounced. Biting and scratching may become compulsive, even leading to hair loss and bald spots. The animal's skin will become extremely irritated and may develop hot spots. When a dog has this type of allergy, its skin may become smelly as a result of infections. For hypersensitive dogs, fleas inflict torturous suffering. Even non-allergic dogs will be incredibly grateful for any relief you can provide them when they are troubled by fleas. So if your pet is suffering from a flea infestation, be sure to deal with the problem as promptly as possible.

Diagnosis

A diagnosis of dog fleas is usually made based upon clinical signs and the presence of flea dirt and/or the fleas themselves. A veterinarian will conduct a physical examination in order to look for these warning signs and will also speak to you, as the pet owner, about the behaviors and symptoms you have observed at home. If you want to look for evidence of fleas on your own, try looking for flea dirt on your pet and on its bedding. Since this flea excrement contains digested blood, when you add a few drops of water to the dirt, the water will turn a reddish brown.

You or the veterinarian can also check for fleas by combing carefully through your dog's fur. However, it's not always easy to spot these parasites as they tend to hide in dark areas. Also, they can be hard to see against dark skin and fur. Furthermore, in the case of a dog that is allergic to flea saliva, fleas and flea dirt may not be noticeable, as only one or two bites are enough to cause extreme discomfort. Under such circumstances, diagnosis will likely be based upon clinical signs. Occasionally, a skin test designed to evaluate your pet's reaction to flea proteins will be used in order to confirm a diagnosis of a flea bite allergy.

Causes

Dogs are not born with fleas; rather, they pick them up from the surrounding environment. In fact, only about five percent of the flea population consists of adults that live on host animals. The rest of the population consists of eggs and fleas in the larval and pupal stages. Adult fleas live on a host, feeding on blood, and females lay up to five hundred eggs each. These eggs then fall off the host and collect in bedding, grass, and other areas of the household and outdoor environment. Once the eggs have hatched and the fleas develop into adults, the parasites can then jump onto your pet and begin feeding upon its blood. The incredible jumping ability of fleas makes it very easy for them to hop onto a dog from the ground or from another infested animal. Since female fleas can lay so many eggs each, an infestation can develop quickly and become a serious problem in a short amount of time.

Treatment

When your dog is suffering from a flea infestation, treatment of both the animal and the household will be necessary in order to effectively deal with the problem. Since such a large portion of the flea population exists in non-adult stages, simply getting rid of the adult fleas is not a real solution. Along the same lines, simply treating the symptoms of a flea infestation, such as irritated skin, will not put an end to the problem. As a result, effective treatment will involve ridding the animal and household environment of fleas in all lifecycle stages as well as providing relief for the irritating symptoms of flea bites.

In order to clear your home of fleas and flea eggs, and to prevent them from returning to your house, it's a good idea to vacuum regularly. Be sure to vacuum everywhere, including on upholstered furniture, under cushions, under beds, in closets, and along baseboards. Fleas and their eggs tend to hide and collect in carpets and other materials, so this step can go a long way toward providing your pet with a flea-free environment. It's also important to keep your dog's bedding clean. Washing the bedding in hot water followed by a long cycle in a hot dryer will help to kill any pesky parasites and eggs that are clinging to the material. In some extreme cases, a thorough extermination may need to be conducted throughout your household.

As for your dog, there are a number of different treatments available, including topical medications and oral medications. These help to kill fleas already present and to prevent further fleas from taking up residence in your pet's coat. Among the effective treatments available are homeopathic remedies that help to put an end to your dog's flea infestation and also provide relief from itchiness, irritation, and other annoying symptoms. Such products provide an all-natural alternative to chemically-based flea control products.

Homeopathic remedies contain natural ingredients with a variety of beneficial properties. For example, lavender, pennyroyal, and neem are all natural substances that act as insect repellents. Sweet mace acts as an insect repellent as well, while also removing fleas that are already present. Other natural ingredients such as tea tree oil and aloe prevent infections and promote healing. Furthermore, rosemary has anti-inflammatory properties and helps to stimulate the regrowth of hair lost as a result of constant scratching and biting. With so many natural substances available with such effective and beneficial properties, homeopathic remedies can be a great way to treat your dog's flea infestation, putting an end to your beloved pet's misery and irritation.

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