

**FLEE FLEAS**  
or  
**“Mommy Why Is Fluffy Ripping The Skin Off Her Tail?”**

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One of life's great imponderables! Why do fleas exist? Well, we can tell you how they exist; such things as a relatively warm humid weather pattern with short mild winters. Very few fleas live in higher altitudes, with dry climates, but here in the Puget Sound area conditions are ripe for massive and abundant numbers of fleas. There are many species of fleas that cohabitate with their associated host species such as bird fleas, rodent fleas and the very common cat/dog fleas that make themselves right at home on and around our pets, yards, and inside the house. Fleas have gotten a head start this year due to such a mild winter. We did get a few killing frosts, but not enough cold weather to make a huge difference. Couple that with the late rains and warm early spring weather and this has enabled the little buggers (boogers?) to start cranking out offspring early. A female flea can lay 20 to 40 eggs per day. Of course she must get fresh blood meals to bulk up first. Fleas cost the pet loving consumers millions of dollars annually in flea prevention products, and many trips to their animal doctors for treatment of skin allergy (flea bite hypersensitivity) issues.

We wanted to get this article out early to alert you to get busy in advance of the summer hatch. The old adage “an ounce of prevention” holds so very true for flea control. If you take a proactive stance early it makes it much easier and cheaper in the long run. One of the most important things you can do is to treat the floors and furniture of the house with the boric acid fine powder derivative found in products made by “Flea Busters” and other brands. The powder can be purchased in Vet's offices, pet, and garden centers for home application by the user, or the company will come to your house with their equipment and apply it for you for an extra fee. This product is safe for pets and kids, is not a toxic poison and is guaranteed unconditionally for one full year. If you want to shampoo your carpets in that year it will negate the warranty, so clean up those floors ahead of time. The product is a bit dusty, but that settles quickly. Normal vacuuming will not reduce the product's effectiveness. Those clients of mine who are faithful about annual application rarely have many fleas to worry about in the house. There are flea bombs and premise sprays available which do help in a pinch, but they must be repeated often, are expensive, don't go down hallways or around corners well, are very toxic to all residents of the house, and have no guarantee. Part of a full flea prevention program includes the house, the yard and the pet all at the same time. If your pet has no fleas yet you can and should still do the house and yard now. There are numerous products for yard applications. My favorite and one of the most effective natural controls involves the use of products containing live, but dormant beneficial nematodes. These tiny little worms feed on the larvae and eggs of fleas and other pests in the garden soil and lawn. They do not harm the good bugs. The product is usually attached to a hose end sprayer and applied much like liquid fertilizer. There is no

smell and the product is entirely nontoxic. This method of “biologic control of fleas is similar to an army of lady bugs ready to eat the aphids off the roses. There are naturally occurring nematodes already in the soil going about their business, but they are in fairly low numbers and certainly not enough to control an onslaught of new fleas. This product has many brand names, and can be obtained from organic garden centers. It must be applied when the soil is warm, and must be kept moist to keep the critters active and hungry. If the sod dries out it must be reapplied, so remember to water as needed. Only the areas of the yard that the pets frequent need be treated, usually closest to the house itself. I don’t recommend toxic yard chemical sprays or powders as this indiscriminately kills beneficial yard insects as well as having pets get these things on their feet and licking them off. Not a good combination!! Time and time again I have seen severe physical reactions to these various toxic chemicals. If you use this effective and nontoxic house and yard program faithfully I can assure you that most of the flea problem will already be solved.

Now comes the hard part, what to do with the pet. Should I put something on the body, or give an oral medicine? There are so many products out there. They are available at Vet’s offices, pet stores and even the grocery store. No matter what, always purchase a product where you can talk to a knowledgeable worker about the safety and effectiveness of that product. Do not just buy something off a shelf or on the Internet without first fully investigating the toxicity and side effects of that product. Each product should have a package insert to read, and an address where more information is available. Do not take it for granted that these flea killers are safe without full knowledge beforehand many a pet, especially cats and puppies, have experienced life threatening toxic reactions to some of these products. Some brand names are known well for the majority of these illnesses or even deaths. Whenever necessary call your pet poison control hotline for advice and your Veterinarian.

I don’t recommend the oral pill insect growth regulators, which don’t allow the fleas to lay fertile hatching eggs. These products can damage the liver, and the fleas must bite the pet to ingest blood that contains the chemical. So who wants the fleas to bite Fluffy anyway? Not a good thing. There are even pills which kill worms in the pet’s system and control fleas at the same time. They have their uses, but I usually stay clear of these products too. Stay tuned for Part 2.