

The Flight of the Fleas (Part deux)
Or
Mommy is that Fluffy's Tail Under the Table

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Well here we go some more. What can we do to keep them damn fleas off of Fluffy's butt? Last time we talked about the premises and we just started to discuss some of the conventional "icky's" that are used to kill, or prevent fleas from infesting our pets. We talked about the "program pills" and others that prevent fleas from ever reproducing. The fleas still must bite to get the "elixir of extinction" from the blood meal, so I don't think too much of those products. Besides that they are real hard on the liver over time in many pets. If your pet is "flea saliva" allergic to those bites, well then products that allow them to bite first before causing their offspring's demise are a moot point. It doesn't stop at one bite either. Have you ever been bitten by a flea? Most families have at least one human member in the household who has flea friendly blood; someone who can always be counted on to get several large, raised, very itchy bumps on their legs, or under tight clothing. We can use lots of B Complex and garlic daily in the pets food, and also add it to our diets. We can put herbal or commercial repellents on, and if we are lucky only the butler or maid gets bitten. Okay and poor Fluffy too! When we go to the weekend cabin, we always run her thru the house first. All the new little hatched fleas are waiting for something to move so that they can leap to freedom, frolic and food! Once Fluffy has collected those 10 or 20 scalliwaggin free loaders then the rest of us can go inside with nary a care of getting bitten, but then poor ol' Fluffy spends the rest of the weekend chewin and digging and trying to catch them little buggars. Flea saliva is one of the most potent itch stimulators on the planet. It sets off a cascade of histamine inflammatory events that lead to hives and intense itching. Some pets, but not all, are very allergic to the saliva. The worse the allergy the more the itch. Having a flea allergy is like ordering Chinese food, "with six you get egg roll"! There is the intense itch, with the subsequent scratching, digging, licking, biting and self trauma in response to that stimulus. Then the hair comes out leaving raw wounds that ooze, called "hot spots". These get secondarily infected by the Staph bacteria already on the skin, and then a deeper pyoderma (skin infection) results which itches even more. There is no relief in sight as the poor little thing "must scratch till it bleeds", followed by a huge sigh, finally relaxing and then starting the cycle all over again. One hot spot leads to another, and soon you have a wretched, smelly, naked mess with four legs for a pet. The front teeth can get worn down flat from chewing. Over time the skin gets oily and sour smelling, it then becomes blackened and thickens, eventually taking on the likeness of an elephant's hide. This is called chronic flea allergy dermatitis. Most of the time the allergy has the flea as part of the problem along with pollens, dust mites, molds, or foods being the remaining parts of the complex. Getting rid of fleas after they are already on the pet is a real dilemma. We used to use dips and sprays to knock them down and kill them right away. The chemicals

were for the most part toxic and harsh, smelled bad, and only had limited residual action to keep fleas off for more than a few days. These products could not be used on very young or older animals, or with pregnancy. Many of the caretakers also became ill by handling these chemicals, or living around their pets after they were applied.

Not so long ago a few companies started selling so called “spot on” flea killers. The idea basically is that the product will absorb thru the skin into the fatty layer and disperse all over the body, being present when the flea bites, takes a blood meal, and takes these chemicals into their bodies. The product also readily binds with the waxy coat of the insects outer skin covering, absorbs internally and kills them. The claims are that the nervous systems of the insect uses different transmitter chemicals than a human or animal does. Over 95% of the nervous system cells use these chemical neurotransmitters in the insect, but about 5 % of the cells are mammal compatible (yep! That’s us and our pets). So are they totally harmless then? You decide. There are websites and package inserts that have all the side effects and negative reactions on them to become familiar with and most are not pretty.

In usage most pets frankly do quite well with these products, and they do a great job killing fleas. Most of them last about a month in duration. Some wash off after 4 or 5 baths ,and some stay with the pet, bath or not. They shouldn’t be used off label in ferrets or rabbits, and shouldn’t be used, or are not meant for younger kittens and puppies less than 8 weeks old.

Every year it seems there is a new brand that does even more, like worming the pet at the same time, or killing and repelling ticks as well. It is frustrating and almost impossible to know what to use without good advice from your pet healthcare professional; and that you should get first. Do not buy over the counter without very good advice and check into it yourself to be safe and sure (read the package inserts ,and contact the companies websites). Every so often we will see news reports about some over the counter toxic product which has claimed more lives and taken more toxic prisoners. These are real events and should not be taken lightly.

When a flea problem already exists I have the client work on the house and yard and while these situations are improving I may use 1or 2 months (at the most) of a “spot on” such as Advantage (which I feel is the least toxic of those available currently). I do not recommend that these poisons be put monthly on any pet. They are unnecessary to use them that often when paying good attention to house and yard as part of a three pronged flea control program. In my humble opinion constant monthly use is toxic, expensive and eventually will make the pet sick.

There are many very good organic flea repellent sprays and powders for the pet, and the bedding. These do a good job of repelling, but not killing fleas. I use the repellents with extracts of erigeron, wild geranium, and oils of cedar, mint, lavender ,with rosemary, and extracts of lemon and lime containing the known organic flea killer “limonene”. A very nice dip contains a couple of chopped up whole lemons, two tablespoons of fresh rosemary, steeped in a quart of hot water overnight, then strained while adding a good quality lavender and almond oil. This can be poured on as an after bath rinse or put into a

spray bottle as a mid-week refresher after Fluffy rolls in dead seal on the beach. When coupled with a good yard and house program, these organic repellents reduce or eliminate the need for using any toxic chemicals at all.

Another great flea killer that is safe is the tea made from the pyrethrum daisy. It takes a lot of plants and flowers to get enough of the principle ingredient, but when used as a rinse it is very effective in killing the flea. These daisies are grown commercially, and are used in sprays, dips, shampoos and powders. The synthetic pyrethrins are much stronger and can be toxic to younger kittens and puppies if left on the skin. I use a 3x solution of pyrethrin in a shampoo to kill fleas with a bath. After a 15 minute lather the body is flea free. There is no residual however to keep new fleas from jumping back on the body.

When you see a single flea there are at least nine more adults on the pet or close by. The adult fleas are only about 5 % of the total population in an area. At least a third of the total is in the egg stage, with the remaining in the larval and the pupae stage, all waiting to quickly become adults. The flea life cycle in good weather can go from initial bite to new hungry offspring within a month. The female lays 20 to 40 eggs per day, which hatch within a few days into larvae that feed on the dry blood droppings of the adults that fall off the pet into the environment. They quickly become pupa and then hatch into new adults when there is any motion on the ground or floor (kind of like those pesky spring weeds that fling seeds everywhere when you touch them). A flea can live in a house waiting for a victim to bite for up to a year without a meal.

So what are all those black pepper granules and curls all over the pet's skin and in their beds? The fleas suck the blood, it passes thru the body and is passed out as flea manure. It is actually dried clotted undigested blood. The larvae use this material for their food supply after hatching from the eggs. If you look close with magnification on a tabletop you can actually see the tiny white eggs spread amongst all this flea manure dirt. It is not unlike salt and pepper. Don't forget how effective metal flea combs are. Daily flea combing on short haired pets can remove hundreds of fleas without any chemicals or treatment. The comb can simply be swished in soapy water to remove and kill fleas and can be used on smaller pets to get them out of the fur.

One nasty parasite that fleas can carry is the flea tapeworm. The larval fleas feed on tapeworm eggs found in segments that are dropped out of the pets anus (bung hole). The immature tapeworm lives inside the larval flea until it becomes an adult flea. When the flea bites the "hair of the dog", the pet will chew at the insect and inadvertently eats the flea. When digested the flea releases the tapeworm which attaches to the small intestine of the pet and can grow two feet long or more, eventually releasing segments out the rectum to start the life cycle all over again.

One last thought; if you have multiple pets, you need to address the issue with all of them at the same time (especially all cats-indoors and outdoors types). The cat is always the reservoir dog for all northwest flea infestations. They absolutely love cat blood the best. Flea control is an all out battle plan, and treated haphazardly or inconsistently will cause

nothing but headache and frustration, just ask your smiling editor Mary about her flea problem last year. Blah, blah, blah Ginger!