

Flea Prevention: Why It's So Important

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Many people believe that fleas are just a part of having a pet. This is not only a myth, but a dangerous one. Fleas are annoying – everyone knows that – but did you know that these nasty creatures could also do a lot of damage to the health of your pet and yourself?

Fleas are called parasites for a reason – they live by biting your dog and ingesting his blood. Your dog's normal reaction is to scratch or nip at the place he feels a flea bite. If your dog has a large infestation, he will scratch and bite even more. Consider these problems fleas can bring into your life:

Flea Allergy Dermatitis (FAD)

If your dog has an allergy to flea saliva, he will have a severe allergic reaction to even one flea bite. Even a few fleas can cause hours and days of intense itching. Flea allergies may lead to redness, crusts, scales and sometimes development of bacterial infection. Many dogs have a characteristic loss or thinning of hair above the base of the tail. FAD is more common than pet owners think.

Fleas spread disease

A bite from an infected flea can spread disease to your dog and cats. Some of these can also be transmitted to humans; all are serious.

- **HAEMOBARTONELLOSIS** is caused by an organism called Mycoplasma and can be transmitted by fleas and ticks. This disease targets and destroys the red blood cells, which are responsible for carrying oxygen. Infection causes depression, loss of appetite, and fever.
- **PLAGUE** is caused by an organism called Yersinia pestis. Although the rodent

flea transmits the disease, the flea is also found on dogs and cats. Fleas are capable of transmitting the disease for months. Plague occurs in multiple places in the world including the western third of the United States.

- **TYPHUS** is caused by *Rickettsia typhi* but it does not cause disease in dogs and cats like it does in people, who get fever, chills, headache, and general pain. In the United States, it most commonly occurs in California, New York, and the Gulf Coast states.
- **TULAREMIA** is caused by *Francisella tularensis* and can be spread by fleas. Dogs may exhibit only loss of appetite, listlessness, and fever. Cats, puppies, and kittens are more severely affected. Tularemia is also called "rabbit fever."

Fleas spread parasitic worms

Fleas can transmit certain tapeworms. Tapeworms are parasites that can live in your pet's intestinal tract. They are flat, and consist of a head, neck, and a body made up of a number of segments. The head usually has suckers or muscular grooves that enable the tapeworm to attach itself to the animal's intestine. Fleas may also transmit another parasitic worm called *Dipetalonema reconditum*, which invades a dog's body cavities and connective tissues. At certain stages, *D. reconditum* can also cause positive results on heartworm tests, although it is not heartworm.

Fleas can cause blood loss/anemia

Even though one or two fleas may not take much blood, a large number of fleas can make your pet lose an excessive amount, leading to anemia. This is particularly true for small puppies or kittens, who do not have the blood to spare.

Fleas can bite human family members

Flea bites can cause some people to itch just as much as a dog does. Children often have more severe reactions than adults. Flea bites on humans usually appear as raised, reddened bumps on the lower legs and around the waist.

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