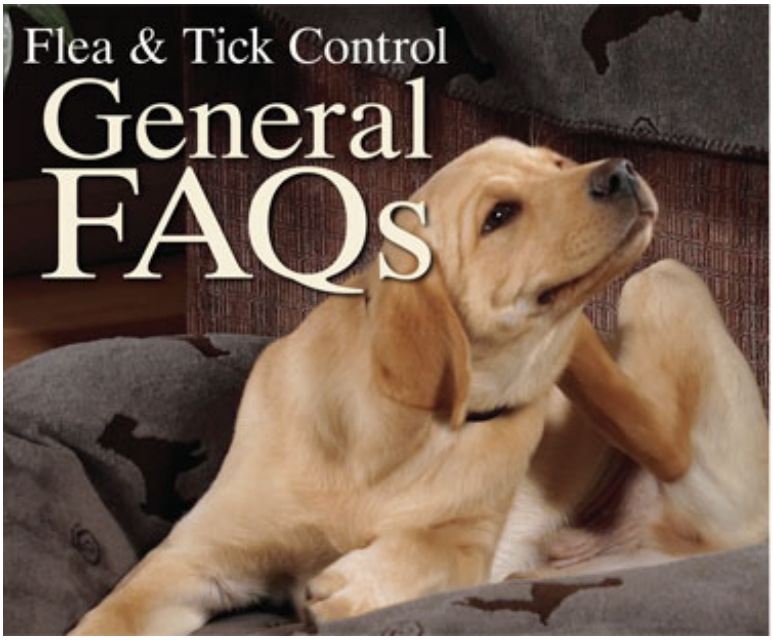
Flea & Tick Control FAQs

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff



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What are the dangers of fleas and ticks?
Fleas can cause medical problems in pets including flea allergy dermatitis (FAD), tapeworms, hair loss due to scratching, and secondary skin irritations. In large numbers, fleas can cause anemia from blood loss, especially in puppies and kittens. Some pets have been known to die if the anemia is severe. Ticks can also transmit serious diseases, including Lyme Disease, Ehrlichiosis and Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever.
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How can I tell if my pet has fleas?
The simplest way to tell if your pet has fleas is by finding the adult fleas or the flea feces (often called "flea dirt") on the animal. Brush your pet over a white sheet or paper towel and look for small dark specks. Flea feces contain digested blood

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and they will turn a reddish brown color when moistened with a small amount of water.
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Can't I just deal with a flea problem if it happens?
When it comes to fleas, prevention is the key. Ask anyone who has had a flea problem - they are now strong advocates of prevention. Controlling and eliminating an already existing flea problem takes a lot of time and effort. And it can become quite expensive if any of the steps are overlooked. We recommend monthly topicals as an easy and low cost way to protect your pets from the discomfort and disease fleas can spread, and to protect your house from possible infestation.
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How can I help reduce my pet's exposure to ticks?
Keeping pets out of grasses and woods helps to reduce their exposure to fleas and ticks. Removing leaves and clearing brush and tall grass from around the house and kennel areas can also help reduce the number. But any animal outside can easily pick up fleas or ticks so we recommend the preventative approach.
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Can I stop worrying about fleas and ticks once it gets cold out?
No. Remember that cold weather does not kill ticks. In fact, spring and fall are when the deer tick numbers are at their peak. As a general rule, we recommend using flea and tick products until after extreme winter conditions persist. In warmer climates, flea and tick protection should be provided year round.
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Do only dirty homes have fleas?
No. Unfortunately, even an immaculately kept home is fair game for a flea infestation if you do not prevent fleas from invading in the first place.
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Can more than one flea and tick product be used at the same time?
Maybe. In most cases, one product should do the job. However, there are some situations in which using two products together can be more effective. Refer to our compatibility chart as a guide for which products may be able to be used together, and consult your veterinarian if you are unsure.
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Can I use dog flea products on my cats?
No! Ingredients in many flea products labeled for dogs can be harmful or fatal to your cat. An example of this is the ingredient permethrin. Products containing permethrin, or any product labeled "for dogs only" should NEVER be used on cats. Cats have a very sensitive metabolism, and using these products on cats or even allowing your cat close contact with a dog that has been recently treated can have disastrous consequences. Many other flea and tick product options are available for cats.
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What is the best treatment for pets with Flea Allergy Dermatitis (FAD)?
Since your goal is to prevent bites from occurring in the first place, you should use a product that kills adult fleas and also eliminates as many stages of the flea's life cycle as possible. This involves using both an adulticide and an Insect Growth Regulator (IGR) or Insect Development Inhibitor (IDI). We recommend topical products such as Bio Spot® Defense Spot On®, or Frontline® Plus. These easy-to-use spot-ons kill adult fleas and prevent eggs and larvae from developing.

If your pet is on a flea control program and still suffers occasional flare-ups, itching can be controlled with products like Itch Stop. In severe cases, your veterinarian may prescribe oral steroids or even hyposensitization injections.
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How do I use my flea comb to check for fleas?
Start by combing around the hindquarters and head of the pet, common areas for fleas to hide. These same areas should be examined for "flea dirt."
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What is the difference between IGRs (Insect Growth Regulators) and IDIs (Insect Development Inhibitors)?
IGRs and IDIs are used in monthly flea prevention products to eliminate the immature form of the flea. The difference in the two is subtle:

IGRs - This group includes methoprene (Precor), fenoxycarb, and pyriproxyfen (Nylar). An IGR mimics the juvenile growth hormone of fleas. The juvenile growth hormone is what keeps the fleas from developing into more mature forms. Normally, as the level of juvenile growth hormone decreases, the larva, the worm-like offspring of an insect form, matures. Since the

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IGR keeps the level of the hormone from decreasing, the juvenile never develops into an adult; it fails to molt and then dies.

IDIs - Insect development inhibitors include lufenuron and diflubenzuron. IDIs inhibit the synthesis of a substance called chitin (the outside, protective "shell" of the insect). Chitin is necessary for the formation of the hard outside skin (cuticle) of the flea. No chitin, no adult flea. IGRs and IDIs do not kill adult fleas, so to be most effective they should be used along with a product that does kill the adults (an "adulticide"), such as pyrethrin. Bio Spot® Defense Spot On® for Dogs and Frontline® Plus contain both of these components. Because IGRs and IDIs mimic insect hormones or alter a unique insect process (chitin production), they are extremely safe.
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I went on vacation, and since I've been back, my house is suddenly infested with fleas! No animals were in my house while I was gone. What happened?
Most likely, there were quite a few flea eggs and larvae in your house before you left, but so few adults that you didn't notice them. While you were gone, the adults laid more eggs and the eggs and larvae continued to develop. The complete flea life cycle, from egg to larva to pupa to adult, normally takes about 15 days. However, under inhospitable conditions (e.g.; cold temperatures, or lack of a host) the pupa stage can become dormant. This dormant period can extend the flea's life cycle to over a year. When the pupa senses the vibrations, carbon dioxide, or warmth that tell it an animal host is near, it finishes developing into an adult and emerges from its cocoon. While you were gone, all of the immature fleas in your house developed to the pupa stage, and then stopped. When you came home, the dormant flea pupae quickly finished developing into adults and emerged. That is why you 'suddenly' have so many adult fleas in your house. Now you'll need to be very diligent about treating both your pet(s) and your house to get the flea infestation under control. We recommend using a spot-on such as Frontline® Plus for your pets, and products like Bio Spot® Flea & Tick Room Fogger & Carpet Powder for your house. For more details on how to get the fleas under control, see our article, Treating An Existing Flea Problem.
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