

Danger of Ticks and Fleas for Dogs and Cats



Ticks can transmit a number of diseases, including Lyme, Ehrlichia, Babesiosis, Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever, and Anaplasmosis. Some of these are potentially lethal.

Flea infestation can lead to skin infections, tapeworms, hair loss from scratching, and anemia. This anemia can be life-threatening, especially in young and geriatric animals. Flea Allergic Dermatitis (FAD) is quite common, in which even a single bite can cause a severe rash.

Signs of Infection

Ticks bury their head under the skin and stay in one spot. When they first attach they may be as small as a pinhead, but they enlarge when they become engorged with blood. They often attach in warm areas, such as the neck or head.

Flea infection usually leads to itching, although some animals are not allergic to the bites and do not develop a severe rash. While you may see actual fleas on your animal, the most common sign is flea dirt, pepper-like granules in the coat, especially on the rump and groin. These are found by either parting the coat or using a special “flea comb” with narrow-spaced teeth. To determine if what you find is flea dirt, which is actually digested blood, place the granules on a moistened white paper towel. Rub them gently; if the paper towel turns orange or red, your animal has flea dirt. It is not necessary to find actual fleas to confirm an infection.

Control

Ticks are not affected by cold weather, and animals with exposure to woods, brush, or tall grassy areas should be treated year-round. All animals that go outdoors should be checked for ticks regularly, but because the ticks are so small before they attach they are easy to miss.

To remove a tick, grasp it tightly with tweezers at the point where the head is imbedded into the skin and pull gently. If mouthparts remain, do not dig after them! If they do not work their way out, contact your veterinarian for removal. Never use fire to remove a tick; it is dangerous and will not work.

While the adult fleas live on their animal host, the eggs, pupae, and larvae do not. For this reason, once there is an infestation, it is often necessary to treat the animal, all other pets, and the house itself. Many of the newer preventatives address multiple stages of the flea life cycle; for example, even if a flea is not killed by a given preventative, the eggs it lays will have actually been affected by the preventative and will not hatch. Washing bedding, thorough vacuuming, and, if necessary, environmental sprays can all help remove non-adult stages of fleas from the indoor environment.

Fleas cannot survive outside in freezing temperatures. However, they can easily be carried on clothing between houses, and hop between apartments. Year-round control may still be necessary, especially in animals with FAD. Flea eggs can also stay dormant for several years in the environment, hatching when they sense a warm body in the house.

There are many options for flea and tick control. For this reason, we suggest that you contact your local veterinarian for their recommendation on what solutions would be best for your pet. A very important consideration is that some products are safe in dogs but not in cats. It is critical to use cat-specific products in cats and dog-specific products in dogs.