

Make Safety a Priority When Fighting Fleas

You have two strategies for treating your dog in the ongoing battle with fleas: topical or systemic remedies.

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You have two strategies for treating your dog in the ongoing battle with fleas. Traditional topical remedies include flea shampoos, dips, powders, sprays and foams. The new systemic approach uses products that work from the inside out. These remedies, pills or topical drops, are absorbed into the dog's bloodstream or tissues and affect the eggs of offspring of fleas after they bite.

To be safe, flea-fighting products, topical or systemic, must be used correctly. The systemic approach is increasingly popular and usually guided by a veterinarian because most of these products are available only by prescription. The veterinarian advises owners on proper use, benefits and safety. Owners who still use flea shampoo, dip or spray (and many still do as part of a home grooming program) usually have little professional guidance. This is unfortunate because topical products contain insecticides, which can be toxic to pets and owners. Even so, it's no cause for alarm.

"Most of the materials that are registered [with the Environmental Protection Agency] are quite safe for the limited types of exposure that you're going to get doing a dog or two," said John Ross, senior toxicologist with the Worker Health and Safety Branch of the California Department of Pesticide Regulation. "Actually, in the general public, this has not been a real big problem as far as we can tell. In our experience, cats tend to be a little more sensitive than dogs to some of these products." Here are a few tips for making the use of topicals as safe as possible:

Research products thoughtfully, and buy carefully. "Obviously, there are a lot of products available on the market," said Sara Ford, DVM, president of the San Diego County Veterinary Medical Association. "You need to be careful with the products you purchase. I would recommend that you defer to your veterinarian: what he or she carries and what he or she says is safe."

Limit contact with insecticides. "The single biggest suggestion: to the extent that you can, avoid contact with the material," Ross said. "Not necessarily because these [products] are extremely toxic, it's because you want to avoid any foreign chemical."

Follow directions. For example, if you use dip, make sure you mix it properly; if you don't dilute it, it can be toxic.

Store flea-control products safely. "Any pesticide should be stored in an area that's not accessible to children and stored separately from food so you don't get any contamination of foodstuff," Ross said.

Apply only as directed, and protect your dog's eyes during application.