

Flea Wars

How to prevent flea infestations.

Itch, itch, scratch, scratch. Like clockwork. Every year dogs all over perform this erratic dance to rid themselves of that blood-guzzling parasite—the flea. What is it about this pesky arthropod that makes it such a daunting foe to dogs and their owners? For one thing, fleas multiply faster than the average fourth grader.

One female can produce enough eggs to infest your entire house. When the eggs hatch the immature fleas, called larvae, go through a cocoon stage. The young fleas mature into the adult fleas we're so familiar with. This life cycle occurs in as few as 14 days, but if the circumstances aren't right—if the weather is too cold—the larvae can hibernate in their little white fortresses for up to five months. They wait for the right moment to break out and start the onslaught.

Fortunately, we have access to products that attack adult fleas (organophosphates, pyrethrins, imidocloprid and fipronyl), prevent baby fleas from growing (methoprene, fenoxycarb and pyriproxyfen), and are eaten by adult female fleas to keep eggs from developing (lufenuron). Some products are applied as shampoos, dips, sprays and foggers, while others are monthly pills or spot-ons.

Which products should you use?

"To prevent flea infestation, start with one of the monthly spot-ons or pills," said Dr. Carlo Vitale, DVM, a veterinary dermatologist in the San Francisco Bay area. "If you already have a big flea infestation...treat the carpets and the yard with products containing an insect growth regulator."

Over-the-counter or veterinary products

There are many good veterinarian-prescribed flea products as well as over-the-counter products. Many OTC products contain the same active ingredients as those sold at the veterinary hospital, but not always in the same concentrations. Make sure you use the product as intended by the manufacturer.

"When choosing an [OTC] flea product, it's important to read the package label," said Karen DeCarlo, a spokeswoman at Farnam, which markets over-the-counter flea and tick control products and other companion animal products. "Specific products are meant to be used on specific animals. Using a product intended for a different species can jeopardize your pet's health." Using a product incorrectly also can be ineffective and is one of the main reasons for treatment failure. The other common reason for treatment failure is neglecting to treat all of the household pets.

Got it straight?

Flea control can be confusing with the varying levels of infestation, number of pets in the household and different product-safety levels. But now you know the types of treatments available. Consult your veterinarian for a treatment regimen tailored specifically for your dog's needs.