

# PEST CONTROL ADVICE SHEET

## FLEAS



### WHAT DO FLEAS LOOK LIKE?

Adult fleas are like small, wingless insects with dark-coloured bodies measuring between 1-3mm in length. The body of the flea is flattened from side to side and is covered with pointed spines which allow it to move easily through the hairs or feathers of its host. The hind limbs of a flea are adapted, allowing it to jump to heights of up to 15cm, quite a feat for an insect of its size. (This equates to a human being jumping 100 metres!)

Several species of flea exist in Britain, but by far the most common (accounting for over 75% of all flea infestations) is the cat flea. Despite being called the 'cat flea' it is often found on dogs and will bite humans readily.

### DO FLEAS CARRY DISEASE?

In Britain fleas are not generally responsible for the transmission of disease. However, they are still objectionable due to bites they inflict and the social stigma that is attached to the thought of having a flea infested house. A typical flea bite has a small, central red spot surrounded by a reddened area and a little swelling. Most bites are below knee height, reflecting the inability of the flea to jump any higher. The bites normally persist for 1-2 days and can be intensely irritating; scratching will often lead to bleeding. It is important to note that certain people are more susceptible to flea bites than others. It is also possible to develop immunity and some people are naturally immune. This helps to explain why not all members of a family appear to suffer with bites in an infested dwelling.

### WHERE DO FLEAS LIVE?

It is a common misunderstanding that adult fleas actually live on the host animal - they do not, they simply feed on the pet and then jump off again. It is only the eggs of the flea that are laid loosely among the hairs of the host or in the animal bedding. Even those eggs laid on the animal will soon fall to the ground. As a result of this they will develop in crevices in the flooring, along skirting boards, under the edges of rugs and beneath cushions on upholstered furniture. The pet's bedding is an obvious area for fleas to develop and a cat's bedding may support a population of 8,000 immature and 2,000 adult fleas.

Before developing into an adult, the flea passes through a period of development within a cocoon. This stage is highly resistant to unfavourable conditions and can survive for up to a year, without feeding, before the adult emerges. This ability to survive in a protected state has important consequences in terms of flea infestation in the home. In a vain attempt to rid a house of fleas, people commonly get rid of the pet; this in fact can make the problem worse.

The flea no longer has its host to feed on and therefore turns its attention to humans. Without the pet present, you are more likely to be bitten.

Similarly, if a house is vacated and left empty for a period of months, the fleas will still survive in the absence of a host. When the house is then occupied again, the fleas will sense the presence of a potential blood meal and can appear 'en masse' when anyone enters the building.

Thus it is clear that once a flea infestation has developed, it can persist for a very long time so it is essential to treat it promptly.

## **HOW TO TREAT A FLEA INFESTATION IN THE HOME**

When carrying out any treatment against fleas, it is important to be very thorough. All areas of the dwelling should be treated, as fleas can easily be transported from room to room. It is also equally important to treat the pet at the same time. A variety of household insecticides can be purchased from hardware stores and vets to treat both your pet and the home. Follow the instructions on the containers.

### **WHERE TO APPLY INSECTICIDE**

- 1 Spray all carpeted areas, paying particular attention to the edges at the wall/floor junctions.
- 2 Spray upholstered furniture, making sure you treat beneath the cushions etc.
- 3 If possible, spray the pet's bedding; if this is not practicable, destroy the bedding.

### **HOW CAN YOU PREVENT FLEAS?**

- 1 Regular vacuuming of carpets and furniture will make it more difficult for fleas to establish themselves.
- 2 Regularly treat your pet; ask your vet for advice. This is particularly important during the summer months with flea infestations reaching a peak in September.
- 3 It is generally recognised that the effectiveness of flea collars is very limited. Sprays are more likely to be of more help.

### **SAFETY ADVICE**

When using insecticides, care should be taken not to spray near uncovered food. Insecticides should be stored in a cool and dry place where children cannot reach, and always wash your hands after using an insecticide.