Fleas, mites, lice & ticks

Revised 2007

Flea treatments now available

pdsa responsible pet care
Fleas, mites, lice and ticks are different types of parasites. Your vet will be able to offer further advice on those that may affect your pet.

**Fleas**
Fleas are small parasites that live on and bite your pet in order to feed on its blood. They can affect cats, dogs, rabbits, birds and hedgehogs. In severe cases, and in untreated young animals, fleas can cause anaemia as they consume so much blood.

Fleas can also bite humans, causing an itchy rash.

The area of skin that has been bitten by a flea becomes inflamed and irritated, which is why infected pets will scratch themselves.

The most common cause of irritation is fleabite hypersensitivity. With this condition, the pet reacts to the flea saliva which is ‘injected’ into the skin when the flea is feeding. This reaction causes nibbling and self-trauma leading to a ‘hot spot’.

Fleas also form part of the tapeworm’s life cycle. Cats and dogs can pick up tapeworms by eating infected fleas.

There are a number of treatments for fleas, including sprays, topical ‘spot-on’ preparations, powders, special collars, tablets and liquids. Your vet is the best person to advise on the most appropriate treatment method for your pet. Although flea products can be purchased over the counter, these may not be as effective as those prescribed or recommended by your vet. Some can also be very harmful if used at the wrong dose or on the wrong species.

It is vital to follow any product instructions carefully, as each pet needs the correct product and dose for its species, age and weight.
It is also important to treat all of your pets and your home furnishings all year round but particularly in the summer. Washing your pet’s bedding regularly in hot soapy water will destroy the young fleas but not the eggs, which is why your vet may recommend using a long-acting household insecticide.

Treat all your pet’s sleeping areas including car seats, sheds and out-houses. Vacuum carpets thoroughly and dispose of the bag’s contents quickly and carefully.

Mites
Mites are tiny, round parasites that cause skin inflammation. They can affect cats, dogs, rabbits, guinea pigs, hamsters, gerbils and birds and there are two different types:

**Burrowing mites**
These live in small tunnels just under the skin surface where they lay eggs. Pets infested with these mites usually have hairless areas of skin that are thickened and inflamed. This is due both to the mites themselves and the pet scratching the affected skin. The condition can be very serious and the necessary treatment can be lengthy. Humans can also develop an itchy rash when in contact with some infected animals.

**Surface mites**
There are also mites that live on the surface of the skin. Ear mites cause a great deal of irritation, making your pet shake its head or rub its ears. This irritation causes the production of excess ear wax, which results in the ear canal’s lining becoming sore.

Cheyletiella (or ‘walking dandruff’) is infectious between pets, and can cause irritation in humans. The pale mites are sometimes just visible when moving across a dark surface.

Harvest mites are common in certain areas of the UK in late summer, often disappearing after a cold snap in early
Fleas, mites, lice & ticks

With all mite infestations it may be necessary to treat the environment as well as the pets involved with a suitable product. All animals that come in contact with the pet, and all of those in the household, may need to be treated with shampoos or sprays prescribed by the vet. The household should be treated with environmental insecticidal sprays that your vet can advise on or supply.

The symptoms are quite varied, but large infestations can cause anaemia and severe irritation. Unlike other parasites, lice spend their entire life living on the pet they have adapted to and rarely go onto another type of animal.

The females lay individual eggs (nits) that are attached to the hairs, which then hatch, developing into adult lice. This life cycle takes approximately three weeks and lice can transmit other parasites.

Treatment may involve insecticidal shampoos from the vet and a fine comb to help remove the nits. Lice can be transferred via grooming utensils that are contaminated with nit-bearing hairs, so scrupulous hygiene is essential.

Lice
Lice are small, oval-shaped, crawling parasites that live by consuming a pet’s blood. They can affect cats, dogs, rabbits, rodents, guinea pigs and birds.

* Image courtesy of Dr Aiden Foster
Ticks
These are small, round, blood-sucking parasites that attach themselves firmly onto a pet. They grow in size over several days, and then drop off to complete their life cycle.

The commonest tick acquired by dogs and cats is the sheep tick, usually caught when walking through fields. As the pet walks by, the tick jumps from the grass and attaches itself onto the animal with its mouth.

Ticks can cause direct irritation to the dog and many owners prefer that their vet remove this parasite, as it can be difficult for the owner to remove. For example, if the tick’s head is left in the dog, it may develop into an abscess.

Ticks can also transmit diseases, such as Lyme disease, which is why it is important to take preventive action in areas where ticks are likely. Your vet will be able to advise you about this.

Tick infestations can be prevented and treated in a number of ways, such as through collars, sprays, spot-on preparations, manual removal and direct treatment. Once again, your vet will be able to advise you on the available options for your pet.

Image courtesy of Dr Aiden Foster
PDSA vets advise:

“It is vital to examine your pets regularly for external parasites and to use only treatments recommended by your vet.”

PDSA is the UK’s leading veterinary charity, providing more than 1.3 million free treatments to sick and injured animals every year.

To find out if you qualify for free PDSA veterinary care, freephone 0800 731 2502.

For more information on the charity and its work, email: info@pdsa.org.uk
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