

Fleas

Cat fleas are frequently encountered in homes and are common pests on domestic cats and dogs. Dog fleas look like cat fleas, but are rare in California. Fleas on either cats or dogs in California are most likely cat fleas. Adult fleas are very small insects (up to 1/8 inch). Female cat fleas remain on the host (unlike most other fleas) and lay about 20 to 30 eggs per day on the animal. The eggs are smooth; they readily fall from the pet and land on surfaces like bedding and carpeting in the animal's environment. They hatch in about 2 days. The whitish, wormlike larvae feed on dried blood and excrement produced by adult fleas feeding on the pet. They feed and crawl around for 5 to 15 days at 70° to 90°F before they build small silken cocoons in which they develop into adult fleas. Fleas may be found on pets throughout the year, but numbers tend to increase dramatically during spring and early summer.



The cat flea is suspected of transmitting murine typhus to humans, but its primary importance is in its annoyance to people and pets. Cat fleas readily try to feed on almost any warm-blooded animal. Some people are bothered by the sensation of fleas walking on their skin, but bites are the major nuisance. Bites tend to be concentrated on the lower legs but can also occur on other parts of the body. The bite consists of a small, central red spot surrounded by a red halo, usually without excessive swelling. Flea bites usually cause minor itching but may become increasingly irritating to people with sensitive or reactive skin.

The best approach to managing fleas is prevention. New, safer, and more effective products aimed at controlling fleas on the pet have made flea management without pesticide sprays feasible in many situations. Management of fleas on the pet must be accompanied by regular, thorough cleaning of pet resting areas indoors and outside. Once fleas infest a home, control will require a vigilant program that includes cleaning and treating infested areas indoors, eliminating fleas on pets, and cleaning up and possibly treating shaded outdoor locations where pets rest.

New product innovations have made it possible to effectively, conveniently, and safely prevent flea populations from building up on pets. These products are more effective and safer than the traditional insecticide dusts and sprays, which until a few years ago were the only choice for pet owners. They come formulated as a systemic treatment that must be administered orally and are available from veterinarians. These products work by either preventing the larvae from turning into adults, or the eggs from hatching, and are virtually nontoxic to pets and people.

Flea collars containing insect growth regulators are virtually nontoxic to pets and humans and can be used on both cats and dogs. The growth regulator is released by the collar and distributed throughout the fur of the pet. Adult fleas coming in contact with the growth regulator absorb it into their bodies where it accumulates in their reproductive organs. Eggs laid by the adult female do not hatch. Flea collars may contain the insect growth regulator as the sole active ingredient or it may be combined with an insecticide. Flea collars containing methoprene are effective for 4 to 6 months on a dog and up to a year on cats.

This article adapted from Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service, USDA. Please contact the Farm Advisor's office at cdcalaveras@ucdavis.edu or 754-6477 with your agricultural questions. Talk to a certified Master Gardener every Wednesday, 10:00-12:00, 754-2880. To speak with a Master Gardener in Tuolumne County, please call 209 533-5696.