

## Fleas

Fleas are a type of wingless parasite found worldwide. They feed off the blood of humans and animals such as dogs and cats. Since fleas use a wide range of hosts, diseases can be transferred from one host to another. Fleas are known to transmit tapeworm larvae and, uncommonly, the disease murine typhus. They are most notorious for transmitting bubonic plague from wild rodents to humans in certain parts of the world (not Australia).

There are three main species of flea that infest humans:

- Cat flea (*Ctenocephalides felis*)
- Dog flea (*Ctenocephalides canis*)
- Human flea (*Pulex irritans*).

The cat and dog flea are common in Australia. A flea bite is intensely itchy and secondary infections caused by scratching are common.

### Symptoms of a flea bite

The bite of a flea has certain features:

- It is extremely itchy.
- A red, swollen wheal develops within half an hour of the bite.
- After a day or so, the wheal (lump) may develop into a blister or small wound.
- The legs and feet are often targeted.
- Secondary infections caused by scratching are common.
- Some people may become hypersensitive (very sensitive) to bites.

### Physical characteristics of the flea

A flea:

- Is wingless, oval shaped and around 2 to 8mm long
- Is light to deep brown in colour
- Has a disproportionately small head
- Has six legs
- Has large hind legs that enable them to jump long distances.

### Blood feeding

Adult fleas can survive for some months without feeding. The flea uses its saw-like mandibles (jaws) to cut through skin, usually on accessible parts of the body such as the legs or feet. Flea saliva contains anticoagulants to encourage the blood to keep flowing. Female fleas are prompted to lay their eggs after feeding. The eggs are light coloured and oval shaped. The larvae cocoon themselves within weeks of hatching. Vibration, such as footsteps, prompts adult fleas to emerge from their cocoons. This is why you may be bitten after entering a house that has been unoccupied for some time.

### Household pets

Dogs and cats are common 'reservoirs' for fleas. Your pet may be irritated by flea bites and scratch often. Check for fleas by parting the fur, particularly around the ears and rump. Look for the fleas themselves or for flea faeces (poo). Flea faeces look like miniscule dark specks. For a positive identification, place a few of the specks on a piece of lightly moistened white tissue. Flea faeces will leech a ring of blood into the tissue.

### Treatment

Suggestions to treat flea bites include:

- Resist the urge to scratch.
- Wash the bites with antiseptic soap to reduce the risk of infection.
- Apply an icepack frequently to help relieve swelling.
- Use calamine lotion, anaesthetic creams or similar to treat the itching.
- See your pharmacist for advice on appropriate antihistamine medications to reduce the swelling.
- Seek treatment for possible tapeworm infection, since fleas can transmit this parasite through their bite.
- See your doctor if the symptoms worsen or if a secondary infection develops (indicated by discharge of pus from wounds).

### **Treating your pet**

Infested animals should be treated fortnightly for several weeks. Suggestions on treating your pet include:

- See your veterinarian for a range of appropriate flea-killing products.
- Treatment options include tablets to be swallowed by the animal, and solutions or powders to be applied to their fur.
- Treat your pet for tapeworm, since fleas can transmit this parasite through their bite.

### **Treating your house**

Your local council can offer information and advice on dealing with a flea infestation. Some general suggestions on eliminating fleas yourself include:

- Clean animal bedding and the general surrounds thoroughly.
- Vacuum the carpets. Throw away the vacuum cleaner bag, since it will contain fleas and eggs, or use a surface spray into the bag.
- Use an appropriate spray or 'flea bomb' in your house, taking care to follow the label directions carefully.
- Treat outdoor areas commonly used by your pet, such as kennels, with appropriate insecticides, wearing gloves and long-sleeved protective clothing as instructed on the label.
- Repeat the procedure once or twice, since flea eggs can survive for some weeks.
- Maintain hygiene practices (regular vacuuming, keeping pets free of fleas and so on) to prevent another infestation.
- A persistent infestation may need to be treated by a qualified pest controller.

### **Professional pest control treatment**

A qualified pest controller can determine the type, source and extent of the infestation, then use registered insecticides to control the fleas. Good hygiene practices, such as frequent house cleaning, should reduce the risk of further infestations.

For further information about finding a Professional Pest Controller, please refer to the Better Health Channel fact sheet Pesticides - how to choose a pest control service.

### **Where to get help**

- The Australian Environmental Pest Managers Association Tel. (02) 9281 7699 or 1800 25 27 72
- Professional pest controllers (check the *Yellow Pages*)
- Your local pharmacist
- Your doctor
- Your veterinarian
- Your local council

### **Things to remember**

- Fleas are a type of wingless parasite that feeds off the blood of humans and animals such as dogs and cats.
- A flea bite is red, swollen and intensely itchy, and secondary infections caused by scratching are common.
- Treatment options include anaesthetic creams and icepacks to reduce the swelling.
- Persistent flea infestations may need to be treated by a qualified pest controller.

**This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:**

DHS - Environmental Health Unit

**Copyright ©** 1999/2009 State of Victoria. Reproduced from the Better Health Channel ([www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au)) at no cost with permission of the Victorian Minister for Health. Unauthorised reproduction and other uses comprised in the copyright are prohibited without permission.

- This Better Health Channel fact sheet has passed through a rigorous approval process. For the latest updates and more information visit [www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au).