

A game of fleas

Virbac's **Blaise Scott-Morris** takes a closer look at an itchy problem around the home

Many of us feel that we are engaging in a yearly battle with fleas. Central heating and milder winters mean these little critters have now become a year-round problem. The most common flea encountered is the cat flea, *Ctenocephalides felis*, which can live on both dogs and cats but luckily not on humans.

Fleas are not only a biting nuisance, causing irritation and discomfort, but they can also cause disease in cats. Some cats are allergic to flea saliva (a condition known as flea allergic dermatitis), fleas can pass on tapeworms and heavy infestations can lead to anaemia in kittens.

There are more products on the market to control fleas than ever before. Yet there are still so many stories of pet owners struggling with fleas. Where is it all going wrong? Let's see if we can uncover the magical solution...

The circle of life

It is important to understand the four stages of a flea's lifecycle to successfully prevent and control them. When unprotected cats pick up a few fleas outside, they come back home with their unwelcome visitors and here the problems begin...

Adults

Adult fleas represent only five per cent of the total flea population. The other 95 per cent exist in your home and surroundings as eggs, larvae and pupae. Adult fleas live on pets, feeding on their blood and causing discomfort and distress when they bite.

Eggs

On average a female flea lays 50 eggs a day, which are then sprinkled around the environment as your cat goes through their daily routine. In perfect flea conditions, 10 female fleas can

produce over one million eggs in 36 days. Flea eggs are invisible invaders unseen by the human eye and can account for approximately 50 per cent of the total flea population in your home, mainly in areas where your cat spends most time. They can fall anywhere your pet has roamed.

Larvae

Hatching from the eggs in one to three weeks these caterpillar-like creatures burrow into carpets, furniture and floorboard cracks. They feed on adult flea excrement, dead skin and food debris and move about very little once they are in a safe hiding place.

Fun fact

One of Britain's oldest games can trace its origins to the flea. In approximately 15 different European languages, the word 'tiddlywinks' translates as 'the game of the flea!'

Pupae

The larvae spin a sticky cocoon and pupate, like a butterfly. This is the most resilient stage of the lifecycle – a survival mechanism. While in the pupal stage, they are resistant against insecticides, in fact nothing but fire can kill them. They can stay dormant until warmth, vibrations and light movements from passing animals prompt them to hatch, often in waves at different times.

The first thing a newly hatched flea must do is feed, so they leap onto the next passing host! The cycle can then begin again...

It can take as little as 21 days to complete the lifecycle. However if

conditions change, pupae can lie in wait for a suitable host for up to a year, potentially maintaining a source of fleas in homes.

Rules of engagement

When considering how best to tackle a flea problem, prevention is better than cure. A combined approach is vital for controlling fleas. Using an 'on-animal' flea treatment, such as a spot-on or tablet, will tackle the fleas on your pet but not necessarily in your home. Using an environmental flea spray, such as Indorex®, will prevent the development of eggs and larvae, and will kill any fleas in the environment. Remember – nothing but fire can kill pupae!

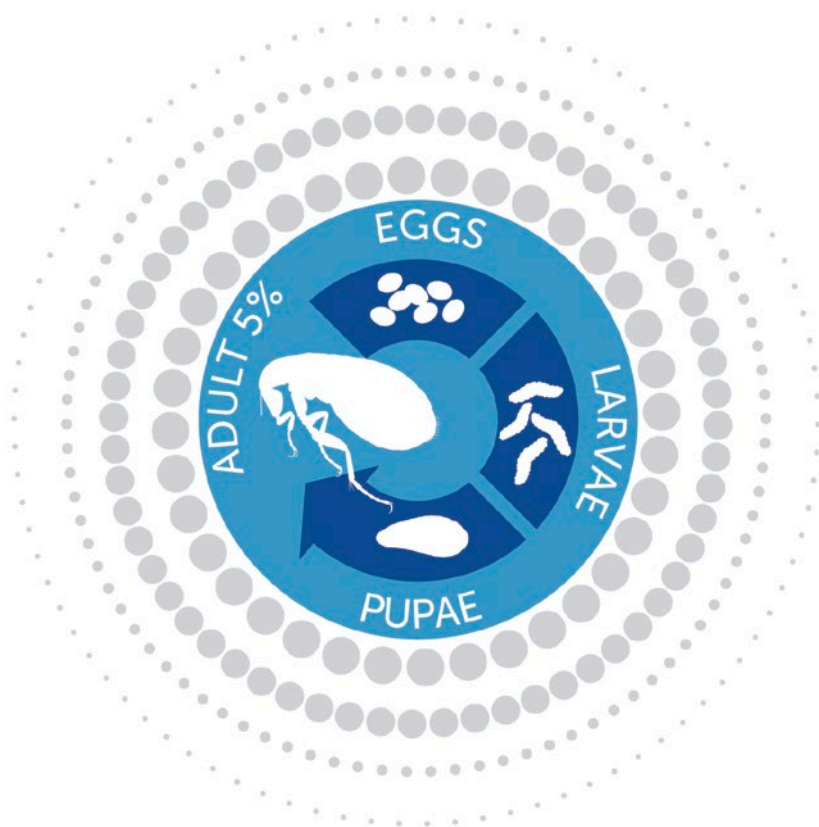
On-animal treatments

Just because you see fleas on only one of your pets it does not mean they are the main culprit; all cats and dogs within a home need treating. Cats are often the worst offenders for keeping an infestation under wraps, with their fastidious cleaning they remove live fleas and some of the 'flea dirt' too, so it can be hard to spot a problem.

The most common products currently on the market are spot-ons or tablets. Which type of preparation you use is best discussed with your vet. Some products, have awards from International Cat Care identifying them as easy to apply, which can help in making a decision – details can be found at www.icatcare.org/cat-campaigns/easy-give Most importantly, ensure your pets receive the correct dose for their bodyweight and never use a product which is not specifically indicated for cats – some dog products can be highly toxic to cats.

Environmental treatments

Environmental treatment can often be overlooked but remember 95 per cent of the flea lifecycle is in the environment. Treatments for your home



usually have two main components, an Insect Growth Regulator (IGR) to prevent development of the immature stages, plus an adulticide to kill the adult fleas.

Don't just treat the rooms your cat goes into as the eggs are very easily distributed everywhere – most importantly don't forget the cat carrier and the car. Using an environmental spray should be considered a regular, usually annual, preventative treatment and not just saved for when there is an infestation.

Another one bites the dust

There are other steps you can take to help make any home flea-free. Regular vacuuming, particularly just after having used a household spray, will stimulate flea pupae to hatch and they can then be killed. Regular machine washing of your cat's bedding will physically remove any fleas, eggs and larvae. Don't forget fleas are likely to lay most eggs while your pet is at rest so pay close attention to these areas.

Top tips

Making sure your cat gets the right amount of treatment is crucial. Not only does this mean carefully weighing your cat, but also ensuring that the spot-on is applied correctly or they don't spit out any of the tablet out.

With spot-on treatments it is imperative that the fur is parted and all the liquid in the pipette goes directly onto the animal's skin, not the fur. Regular use of these treatments, following the recommendations for each product, will ensure fleas are kept at bay.

Feel free to ask

It would seem there is no magical solution in the battle against fleas. Tackling and eliminating an established infestation can take time, however by combining on-animal and environmental treatments you can dramatically speed up this process and prevent the problem reoccurring. If ever you are unsure about which product best suits your needs, or how to use a product, then consult your veterinary team – they are the professionals! ●

Blaise Scott-Morris BVSc MRCVS qualified at Bristol in 2011. For three and a half years Blaise worked in Small Animal Practice for both independent and corporate practices, developing a keen interest in client communication and practice profitability. In October 2014, Blaise joined Virbac as a Veterinary Advisor, providing technical support and training, both internally and externally, and participating in pharmacovigilance.



To get rid of fleas for good, a year-round preventative regime **MUST** break their life cycle by protecting your home as well as your pets. Indorex® is the leading veterinary household spray*, protecting homes from fleas for a full 12 months and is also approved by the HSE¹ to control house dust mites. An odourless, easy-to-use insecticidal spray, it kills adult fleas and prevents the development of their eggs and larvae. It is proven to be stable in UV light and it will protect your home for up to a year.

NEW: Download the free 'Blippar' app to your smart device, scan the front of the can and learn the secrets of staying flea-free!

For further information: call 01359 243 243 or visit www.virbac.co.uk

We're making protecting your home easier by giving away 15 cans of Indorex! Winners will have a can despatched direct to the address provided.

Enter in the usual way: to either competitions@cats.org.uk or by post to *The Cat* magazine, National Cat Centre, Chelwood Gate, Sussex RH17 7TT. Do remember to mark your emails and envelopes with VIRBAC. Competition deadline 9 October 2015.

*GfK (MAT May 2015, veterinary sales) ¹ Indorex is fully approved by the Health and Safety Executive