

Basics of Natural Flea Control

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The High Points

1. The importance of an extremely high quality diet cannot be overemphasized, since healthier dogs and cats seem to have less damaging reactions to the fleas
2. Environmental control is critical if you want to reduce the treatments you use on your pet - Borax salts in the house and beneficial nematodes in the yard are effective
3. Herbal sprays, shampoos and powders may or may not be effective, but flea combs used daily are a good idea.
4. If your pet has a severe infestation, topical conventional treatments such as Advantage or Frontline may give rapid control while you institute a natural control program.

Introduction

Fleas can reproduce with amazing speed; in one month 10 females can generate a population of over 267,000 offspring. Since they have been doing this for millions of years without our interference, fleas are tough to fight. The "war on fleas" must be approached with the idea that the fight is ongoing; fleas will come back unless you adopt a maintenance system, all season long.

The secret to flea survival and to our control tactics is in the flea life cycle:

EGG -> LARVA -> PUPA -> ADULT -> EGG -> etc

The adult flea spends almost all of its time on your dog or cat, but remember those hundreds of thousands of offspring? The female lays her eggs in warm dark places (like your carpet and sofa), and they are the reason that the strongest part of your flea defense must involve the house and yard. The real problem is in the pupa stage; it is resistant to just about everything, so that even when you kill all the adults, eggs and larvae with conventional insecticides and growth regulators, you will have fleas again in about two weeks when the pupae hatch.

The basic protocol for flea control might look something like this:

Pet:

The cornerstone of flea control is good overall health for the animal, and a high quality premium or balanced homemade diet is absolutely essential. When the animal is healthy, s/he does not "taste" or "smell" as good to the fleas. Garlic and brewers yeast nutritional supplements have been used for years in the fight against fleas, but in my experience, they do not work any better than simply feeding a very good diet. They act as nutritional supplements, and definitely help if the diet itself is poor.

Bathe and dip weekly as needed. While there are herbal flea shampoos available commercially, fleas will die if they are simply immersed in the soap from sudsing up

your dog, so you can use any shampoo that is safe for pets. Dips may contain neem, pyrethrin, limonene or other herbs or herb extracts. D-limonene has been associated with serious toxicity in dogs and cats, and should probably be avoided. Another option involves herbal extract oils . - these oil combinations contain herbs such as lavender, citronella, orange oil, and even the toxic herb, pennyroyal, and can be diluted in water like a dip (15-20 drops in a gallon of water, then left on the animal to dry). Another method that has been recommended is application directly to the fur over the tail, feet and between shoulder blades every 2-3 days as needed (this method has rarely caused skin irritation, so do a test patch first). Be aware that small dogs and cats may be extremely sensitive to some of these oils, like tea tree oil, and you should use these only after obtaining safety studies and guarantees from the company that makes them.

Between baths, which serve mainly to clean up flea dirt and decimate at least a part of the adult population, you should treat your pet with a flea comb, flea powder or spray. Diatomaceous earth and pyrethrum dust or the herbal sprays work temporarily and must be used frequently since they begin to break down within hours. You may need to apply these coat treatments every day or two during flea season! Remember that commercial herbal repellants don't last long once exposed to air, but they are usually safe to use frequently.

Don't forget the value of a simple flea comb. Using these special combs every day not only rids your pet of the adults that happen to live on him or her, but will keep you informed of how serious the problem is on a day to day basis.

With the advent of the new products, Frontline and Advantage, flea control is certainly less labor intensive than using daily powders and sprays. We have rarely seen problems with these products, although the rare animal has shown skin reactions or acted unwell for a few days after treatment. If your pet has serious skin problems and discomfort from fleas, it may well be worth using these products until general environmental control can be achieved. Be aware though, flea resistance to these products appears to be occurring, so it's time to get into practice treating your pet and house naturally!

House:

Recall that the secret to flea control is in the FREQUENCY of your flea treatments. The conventional sprays and foggers, and especially those of commercial pest control services, are not safe to use more than about once a month, yet you should be attacking the new adult fleas every 2 weeks or so-this is why the conventional treatments, even with a growth regulator, may fail. If you use a conventional spray (no foggers please), use one with pyrethrins AND methoprene, and use as often as the label allows, up to every 2 weeks.

The more natural alternatives include using diatomaceous earth or borax in your carpets, but these treatments are fairly messy for the frequency with which you will have to use them. The one best natural flea treatment is borax salts. This is a form of borax that lasts for up to one year in your carpet/upholstry, which is tantamount to treating for fleas

EVERY DAY. This product will lighten your work load considerably-it absolutely changed my life! You can find these products in local pet stores, or through the websites listed below. Remember to pay special attention to areas where your pet hangs out or sleeps. For dogs, cedar beds may help a bit.

Vacuuming frequently removes flea eggs and larvae. Some people have had luck with flea traps, but these only address the small proportion of fleas that happen to be adult, and they will not make a difference if used alone.

Yard:

Control in the yard is sometimes the most difficult and expensive, especially if your animal roams a great deal. Just remember that the areas where s/he spends the a lot of time are the most important. Natural treatments that have been used include diatomaceous earth, pyrethrum dust and "beneficial nematodes". These beneficial organisms are sold under individual brand names like Orcon, Interrupt, Lawn Patrol and Guardian. Apparently these nematodes attack and kill the larvae of fleas, as well as those of over 250 other harmful insects like peach tree borers, roaches and possibly termites. These nematodes are said to be harmless to beneficial insects, birds and mammals. Look for them in garden centers and pet stores.

Summary:

Flea control is a season long, coordinated attack that must be maintained whether you use conventional or natural products. The advantage to natural flea products is that they may be safer to use in the frequent manner required. By doing the two most important jobs in controlling fleas on your pet-feeding a great diet, removing fleas from your pet frequently, and using natural treatments for the environment , you will find that natural flea control works fairly well and you will have a happier pet by the end of the season!

Resources:

Fleabusters: <http://www.fleabusters.com> (Sodium polyborate house powder)

BioLogic: <http://www.biologicco.com/> (Beneficial nematodes)

Bio Flea Halt!: <http://www.farnam.com/> (Beneficial nematode yard spray)

Gardens Alive!: <http://www.gardensalive.com/> (Flea combs, Diatomaceous earth, Beneficial nematode yard spray)

Pristine Products: <http://www.pristineorganicproducts.com/> (Diatomaceous earth and pyrethrins).

The Original Neem Company: <http://www.neeminc.com/CATALOG/PetCare.htm> (Neem sprays, shampoos and powders)

Neem Tree Farms: <http://www.neemtreefarms.com/form.html> (Sprouts formula neem flea spray)

Wow Bow Distributors, Ltd.: <http://www.wow-bow.com/> (Diatomaceous earth, Natural Animal herbal flea collars and flea combs)

PetSage: <http://www.petsage.com> (Natural flea control products)