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Dr. Nancy Irvine
Daisy Hill Animal Hospital, Ltd.

Use a four-step process to rid fleas from pets, home

Q: I have two cats that live with me. One, Mittens, has been losing hair, scratching, and now has scabby spots. I can see a few fleas on Mittens, but I have not seen fleas on Sammy. How do I get rid of the fleas?

A: Mittens' hair loss and dermatitis may be caused by an allergy to flea saliva that she is exposed to when a flea bites her. I will answer your question about how to get rid of the fleas, but, please, do have Mittens examined by your family veterinarian. She may have other causes for her dermatitis, and she needs relief from that itchiness.

Many diseases are better (and easier) to prevent than to treat. Flea infestation and the horrible itchiness that often results from flea bites are definitely worth preventing. But first, let's attack the infestation that you have described.

You mentioned that you have two cats living in your house and that one is very itchy with loss of hair and some scabs and the other seems fine. The best way to eliminate fleas is to first understand how fleas live. Some of us, like you, can see the adult fleas moving through the hair coat of a cat. The pinhead size adult flea is just too small or quick and sneaky for some people to see. The other three life stages of the flea are invisible to our eyes without a microscope.

After biting your cat for a meal, the female flea lays about 50 tiny eggs per day that eventually fall into your cat's bed or onto the floor of your house. Those eggs may hatch into larvae that hide in tiny cracks in hard floors or deep in the carpet pile where they grow and form a cocoon called a pupa.

The pupa is practically indestructible. It can open to release a new adult flea in days or in months making the pupa the toughest stage to attack. The vibration created by frequent vacuuming helps to stimulate the pupa to release an adult flea. Safe products and strategies exist to attack the egg, larva and adult life stages effectively.

Recognizing that the adult fleas that you can see are a very small part (near 5 percent) of the entire flea population, allows you to better understand why treatment strategies must attack more than just the adult flea to be effective. Using a four- step approach works very well and can work very quickly. With some plans, it only takes a few days before your pets and home can be free of fleas, and your pet can stop scratching. Here are the four steps:

- ◆ Seek veterinary assistance for pets with itchiness or dermatitis to help them heal.
- ◆ Treat all pets in your home to eliminate adult fleas. Some pets are not allergic to fleas, but all pets must be treated.
- ◆ Treat your house to eliminate adult and immature fleas.
- ◆ Use a smart strategy to prevent the infestation from happening again.

To make your plan work, we need to know more information about your pets' lifestyle and your home. Knowing this information helps us to choose products that can be used safely and that will work for the way your pets live their lives. You have told me that you have two cats. Do your cats ever go outside? Do you have any other indoor or outdoor pets or stray animals near your home? Do you have visitors that bring their pets? Do you travel with your pets? When you discuss this information with your family veterinarian, he/she can explain to you how to use a chosen product or strategy, what to expect, and what options you have that will meet the requirements of the four-step approach specifically for you and your pets.

Prevention of fleas for strictly indoor pets with little exposure to the world may be successful by aiming at just one of the flea life stages (ex. adult, larva or egg); however, for pets who are likely to be exposed to fleas, a more secure prevention strategy stops the flea at more than one life stage. We commonly target flea eggs and adults for prevention. Most importantly, we want your strategy to be safe and effective for you, your pets and your home. When this is achieved, then your strategy will be successful and will be very cost effective, too.