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Ask the Vet: Spring's the time to start fighting fleas

Spring seems to have leaped like a cat and landed suddenly and early on the heels of an unusually mild winter season. An early onset and a rapid growth of flea numbers are the expected consequences of such unusually warm and humid weather.

Fleas overwinter quite successfully in our area indoors where a flea population has become established inside a home or outdoors where they live on outdoor pets or wildlife. Outside, the rigors of harsh winter weather can effectively kill three of the flea life stages (egg, larva and adult) if these stages are without the protection of an animal host. But many of the more hardy cocoon or pupa stage can withstand winter. An especially mild winter is expected to lead to the emergence of a larger population of newly-hatched adults in the early spring. Preparation for this sudden spike in flea population is important.

Now is the time to discuss flea control strategy for pets with a veterinarian. Now also is the time to become educated about the effectiveness and safety of the products used for pets and for family homes. If an owner sees any fleas or if a pet is itchy, this is the time to solve the problem quickly so the home does not become a site of a huge flea population. The current warm and humid weather conditions will help not only the overwintering pupae to mature into adult fleas, but these conditions are ideal for all the life stages of the flea to succeed.

Many people who have not experienced having a flea infestation in years past may find themselves facing this parasite problem this year. A sound strategy for prevention is much easier and much more cost-effective than battling an existing problem.

Fleas are a vector for intestinal tapeworms that are commonly identified in dogs and cats. This tapeworm can also infect people -- usually children who are more likely than adults to be spending time on the floor where they may unknowingly swallow an infected adult or larva stage flea by putting hand to mouth. Once ingested, the infected flea transports the immature tapeworm to the person's intestinal tract where it can mature into the adult tapeworm.

Fleas are the primary vector for cat scratch disease in people which can be severe and debilitating. In fact, the key to prevention of cat scratch disease is flea control.

Fleas feed by sucking blood from their hosts. Blood loss anemia, seen most often in small or young pets, can weaken a pet and contribute to serious illness.

Many pets are allergic to the biting flea's saliva. Just one or a few flea bites often triggers intense and lasting skin itchiness that leads to anxiousness, discomfort and self trauma with hair loss and secondary infection.

Many patients that are treated by veterinarians for such intense skin itchiness will sleep soundly shortly after treatment, because the treatment has relieved their misery of itchiness. These pets are exhausted from all the scratching and lack of sleep.

Now is an opportune time to consult a veterinarian regarding an effective strategy for flea prevention.

Expect a thorough approach where more than one life stage of the flea is being inhibited. Often a combination of products that act on different life stages of the flea is needed to create an effective shield from fleas.

Recent studies conducted in flea-infested homes (not laboratories) located in the typically humid southern areas of the United States evaluated effectiveness of flea control products. Results invariably proved the tested products to be effective, but only when used correctly. Correct timing and administration method are essential for products to work. Effectiveness is also dependent on expectations for a product.

Discussing with a veterinarian expectations, the correct timing and method of use, and the safety of flea control products chosen will help to keep the fleas at bay. With an effective flea control strategy in place, we can make the most of our warm, sunny spring.