

Ticks and Fleas on Pets

No one wants their pets to be plagued with fleas and ticks, those unpleasant parasites that get their nourishment from the blood of their host. Not only is it horrible for your pet, but these parasites can also seriously affect the health of both your pet and your family.

While both have similar ways of feeding, there are several differences between fleas and ticks. Fleas jump from host to host, but ticks neither jump nor fly. Ticks wait on grasses and shrubs with their front legs outstretched and when you or your pet brush past, they grab onto either.

Once they latch onto you or your pet, they will look for a warm place to attach, often in hard-to-find places like between the toes or inside ears. The good news is that there are several excellent products on the market which will help to prevent these parasites from moving in permanently.



Fleas and ticks are not only active in the spring and summer months but are year-round risks. Continuous flea and tick protection is essential for your pet.

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FLEAS

Animals like dogs, cats, rats, rabbits, mice, squirrels, and chickens are the preferred hosts of fleas because they need plenty of hair or feathers to live in and lay their eggs on. Although they bite humans, fleas tend not to live on us for long because we do not have enough dense hair for them to hide and reproduce in.

Fleas are tough creatures - they can survive for weeks without a single meal. Cold weather may slow them down but unless it is freezing, it will not kill them.

Fleas are the most common parasites found on our pets, and can lead to the following problems:

- Irritation and itching
- Allergies
- Ear infections
- Secondary skin infections
- Blood loss-related anaemia in severe cases.

The average flea on a host lives for around 100 days, however, in the right environment they could live as long as a year, while constantly reproducing.

Once an infestation has set in, it can be incredibly challenging to deal with, involving pesticides and much washing and vacuuming. In such a case, prevention is definitely better than cure and, since our pets are one of the main ways in which fleas get into our homes, keeping their anti-flea treatments up to date is really important.

What Happens When a Flea Bites?

When fleas bite, they inject saliva, which contains an anticoagulant (blood thinner), into the wound. The immune system triggers the release of histamine, which causes the bite wound to swell and itch.

Flea bites generally result in the formation of a slightly raised, swollen itching spot with a single puncture point at the centre (similar to a mosquito bite). They tend to remain fairly small. The bites often appear in clusters or lines of two bites and can remain itchy and inflamed for up to several weeks afterwards. Your pet will probably scratch or bite at these itchy areas.

These bites may go unnoticed on some pets, cause slight irritation in others, and produce extensive itching, red lesions, hair loss, and even ulcers in those animals with flea allergy dermatitis, which is the result of extreme sensitivity to flea saliva. Animals suffering from this, only need one flea to cause a major problem.

Severe flea infestations can cause anaemia, especially in puppies and kittens. Fleas are an important part of the tapeworm's life cycle, which could result in possible tapeworm infestation. There is also a risk of secondary bacterial infection, particularly if the bite is scratched open.

Signs That Your Pet May Have Fleas

Just because you cannot see fleas, it does not mean that they are not there. The most obvious signs that your pet has fleas is increased and persistent scratching, biting, and licking but there are others, including:

- Loss of fur in patches, mostly as a result of over-grooming. This is particularly noticeable around the tail and neck.
- Flea dirt, which resembles black pepper or fine, dark dirt, amongst the fur or on the skin, or even where your pet has been sitting or sleeping.
- You may see the tiny brown parasites jumping or crawling through fur.
- Red bumps or scabs.
- Behavioural changes, such as restlessness or nervousness, due to the intense itching.
- Pale gums in severe cases.

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What to do if your pet has fleas

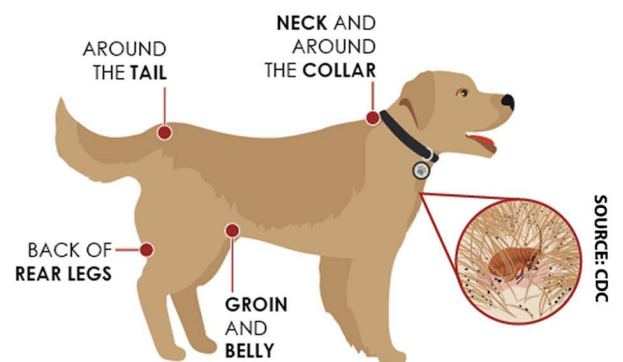
It is important to treat all your pets and your house on the same day in order to achieve total flea control.

- Visit any TAH practice or vetshop and our staff will recommend the most effective tick-and-flea treatment for your pet. Note the type, age, and size of your pets so that they can recommend the safest product for each animal.
- Vacuum your entire house, paying particular attention to corners, dark crevices, under furniture and beds, pet beds, rugs, and especially around skirting boards. It has been shown that high-powered vacuums can disrupt the egg and pupae of the fleas and kill them. The vibration from vacuuming also stimulates the fleas to emerge from their cocoons and they will thus be exposed to the insecticide that will be used.
- When you have finished vacuuming, dispose of the contents of your vacuum cleaner completely, ensuring that no dust remains inside. Through this, you will be removing eggs, larvae, and pupae from your house.
- Wash all of your pet's bedding and soft toys. Shake them well and hang them in the sunlight to dry.
- If you choose to use insecticides, always read the label of the insecticide carefully before spraying. Look for the ingredient IGR (Insect Growth Regulator) which acts as birth control for fleas, stopping them from developing to maturity so that they cannot lay eggs. Ensure that people and pets are safely outside before spraying all carpets, rugs, floors, soft furnishings, and places where your pet sleeps. Vacuuming is very important before spraying insecticide but do not vacuum for at least two weeks after spraying as the IGR component needs to remain there for a

residual effect.

- Take the same spray you used indoors for your garden and outdoor areas as well. Spray around the pet's bed, in crevices, gravel, and sandy areas. Areas of the yard which are in direct sunlight should be fine as the larvae tend to avoid bright places.
- Discuss flea treatment with your TAH veterinarian and use a vet-approved product that has been tested for safety and efficacy on your pet.

Where to check if your pet has fleas



TICKS

Ticks are endemic to South Africa (meaning they are always present) and there are over 100 species, some of which have hard bodies and some soft. Some species can survive for several months without a host, lurking amongst grasses and bushland, waiting for a handy meal to come by. Ticks need humidity in the air to undergo metamorphosis from egg to larva and, once in the adult stage, they need this humidity to keep them hydrated.

Ticks and Fleas on Pets



Be on the lookout for these pesky creatures that lurk in moist, shaded woods, low-growing brush, dense weeds, or piles of leaves.

What Happens When a Tick Bites?

Ticks extract the blood from their host by cutting a hole in the host's epidermis, into which they insert their hypostome (a harpoon-like structure near their mouth parts), keeping the blood from clotting by excreting an anticoagulant.

They also inject an anaesthetic so that the bite is painless, which allows them to stay attached without the animal noticing and trying to get it off. You may not even see a bite, although there can be redness, swelling, or a hard bump. Sometimes, a blackish mark surrounded by red, inflamed skin (eschar) can form.

In some cases, ticks can become embedded in the skin, causing infection that can be severe. The area will be swollen, hot, filled with pus and very painful. Allergic reactions to tick bites are also possible. If tick infestations are severe, they can cause anaemia, particularly in small animals like puppies. Some ticks can also cause temporary 'tick paralysis', which is manifested by a gradual onset of difficulty walking that may develop into paralysis.

The bottom line is that, even if the tick is not carrying one of the major diseases, these critters are still not something to be ignored.

Diseases Caused by Ticks

The most common serious tick-borne diseases affecting pets in South Africa are biliary (aka canine or feline babesiosis or tick fever, or 'bosluiskoor' in Afrikaans) and ehrlichiosis (tick-bite fever). Note that it

is possible for your pet to be infected with several types of ehrlichia and babesia at the same time.

Biliary

Biliary is a serious tick-borne disease that affects the red blood cells of pets. Ticks transmit tiny infectious parasites into their host's bloodstream where they multiply in the red blood cells. During this process many more red blood cells are invaded and eventually destroyed, leading to anaemia. Symptoms and signs of biliary in dogs are:

- Lethargy (your pet is just lying around listlessly) and depression.
- Loss of appetite (anorexia).
- Fever (a feverish pet may have hot ears and nose but be shivery).
- Swollen glands.
- Anaemia (pale gums and inner eyelids).
- Vomiting.
- Dehydration.
- Jaundice (yellow gums and inner eyelids).
- Red or dark urine (this is from the destroyed red blood cells).
- Nervous symptoms such as seizures.
- Peracute cases (sudden, severe onset) can lead to death within a matter of hours.

Cats, on the other hand, will present differently, without pale or yellow gums or a fever, unless there are underlying conditions. Symptoms include lethargy, loss of appetite, poor coat condition, and weakness.

Ehrlichia

Ehrlichia is a bacteria which infects and lives within the white blood cells of their hosts (whereas biliary affects red blood cells). It is usually transmitted by the brown dog tick, and causes a disease called ehrlichiosis, which can be fatal. Ehrlichia is much more frequently diagnosed in dogs but cats can get some forms of it, as can humans.

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Symptoms and Signs of Ehrlichia

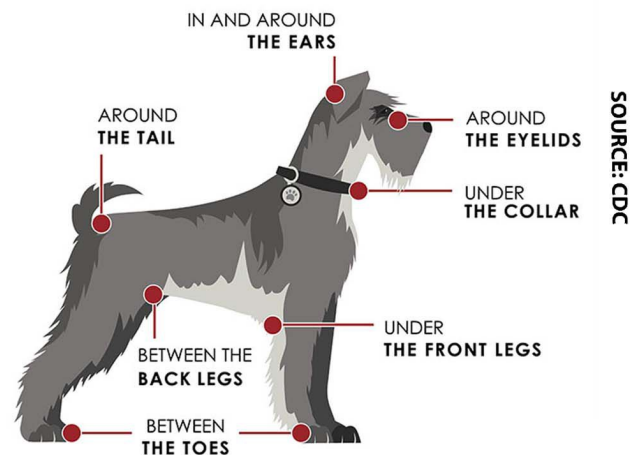
- Lethargy.
- Poor appetite and weight loss.
- Fever.
- Abnormal bleeding, such as nose bleeds, and bruising.
- Enlarged lymph nodes and spleen.
- Swollen limbs.
- Shortness of breath.
- Nervous system signs such as muscle twitches or unsteadiness.
- Cats may also develop anaemia, swollen joints, and breathing difficulties.

What to Do if you Find a Tick on Your Pet

- The best way to deal with finding a tick on you or your pet is to stay calm not rush it. Moving too fast when removing a tick could potentially create more problems, both for your pet and for you.
- Open the area and part the fur around the tick so that it is clearly visible.
- Put on gloves and use tweezers to grip the tick's head as close to your pet's skin as possible.
- Using a pair of tweezers, grasp the tick as close to the animal's skin as possible. Pull straight upwards with steady, even pressure. Do not twist as the head could break off and become embedded in the skin, resulting in an abscess, and do not squeeze the body of the tick.
- Place the tick in a jar that you can take to your veterinarian if needed.
- Thoroughly disinfect the bite site with pet-friendly disinfectant and wash your hands with soap and water (even though you were wearing gloves). Sterilise your tweezers with alcohol or by carefully running them over a flame. Note that you cannot use products like Dettol on cats.
- Keep an eye on your pet for some time after removing the tick. The bite area may start

showing signs of localised infection or signs of biliary or ehrlichiosis might appear. Signs may take days, weeks, or months to appear. Bring your pet to your nearest TAH branch—with the tick in the jar – so that your veterinarian can assess your pet and start treatment immediately.

- Avoid remedies like trying to smother the tick with paraffin or petroleum jelly or touching a lighted match to it. This can cause the tick to regurgitate the contents of its stomach, potentially pouring infectious pathogens into your pet.



Treatment against ticks and fleas for your pets

There is also no way in which we can control all the ticks and fleas in the environment as they really are everywhere. That is why it is so important to keep your pet's tick-and-flea prevention treatment up to date throughout the year, particularly if you and your pet are enjoying the great outdoors. TAH offers a wide range of products for you to choose from, including monthly or three-monthly options in tablets or as a spot-on pipette—ideal for cats or those dogs who have difficulty in taking tablets. Our veterinary staff will advise you on the best option for your pet.

Safety note

Always make 100% sure that any products you use are pet friendly, including for fish, birds, and reptiles.