

Flea Allergic Dermatitis

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BASIC INFORMATION

Description and Cause

Flea allergic dermatitis arises from an adverse immunologic response to flea saliva. It is an extremely itchy dermatitis that follows exposure to fleas. It arises most often in dogs and cats aged 6 months to 5 years. In the northern United States, is often a seasonal disease, occurring from May until the first freeze, but it can occur all year round in warmer areas.

Clinical Signs

Dogs have moderate to severe itchiness, papules (little red bumps), redness, and self-trauma from biting and scratching in the affected areas. Most commonly affected locations in dogs are the base of the tail, over the back, the backs of the thighs, and the front legs. Hair loss, scratched skin, increase in skin pigmentation (blackening), and scaling (dandruff) are commonly seen.

In cats, head and neck itching, very red lesions on the belly, and tiny bumps with scabs can be seen.

Diagnostic Tests

The diagnosis is often made from circumstantial evidence, such as suspicious history and physical examination findings, particularly lesion distribution, response to flea control, and presence of fleas and flea “dirt” (especially with use of a flea comb). Flea dirt is actually flea feces. They are small black flecks that resemble dirt, but, when a drop of water is added, they reconstitute to a bloody liquid.

TREATMENT AND FOLLOW-UP

Treatment Options

Flea control on the individual animal and any house mates must be aggressively pursued and can involve the following:

- Topical agents include baths and sprays. (See the **Flea Product Chart** that accompanies this handout.) Note that some products made for dogs *must not* be applied to cats.

- Oral agents kill fleas immediately or help reduce their reproduction.
- Many of these agents can be used together. Your veterinarian will help you pick the best program for your pet or pets.

Environmental flea control is also extremely important, and your veterinarian may choose from the following options:

- Adulticides kill adult fleas. These products are synthetic pyrethrins and have a quick killing action. They (especially permethrin) are toxic to cats in any concentration stronger than 0.5%. They are stable for use indoors and out and are available from veterinarians, pet stores, and home supply stores.
- Juvenile hormone analogues kill eggs and immature or larval forms. Methoprene is for indoor use only. Pyriproxyfen and fenoxycarb may be used indoors or outdoors.
- Outdoor organic control can be accomplished by using nematodes, called *Steinernema carpocapsae*, that kill the immature forms of fleas. Nontoxic indoor control can be accomplished with sodium borate products made for flea control.
- Fleas like humid environments and moist, organic matter. It is important to clean any of these areas that may be in the yard (such as under porches or decks).
- Severe itchiness may require temporary treatment with steroids and baths.

Follow-up Care

If the pet does not improve, it should be re-evaluated. Problems with administration of flea products, environmental control, or the presence of an additional allergy could explain a poor response.

Prognosis

Prognosis is good to excellent with good flea control, but it is important to apply the products exactly as instructed, for the sake of both your pet and the environment. Because it only takes the saliva from one flea bite to exacerbate the problem, complete flea control is essential.