

FLEAS & TICKS

With flea and tick season just around the corner, it's crucial to understand how these critters operate and how to keep them at bay.

WORDS
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It's exceptionally easy for your dog to get fleas, and it can be exceptionally difficult to get rid of them, especially when you have numerous dogs.

Fleas love the Australian climate and thrive during the summer months. Even the healthiest dog living in a flea-free environment can become infested if it comes into contact with a flea-infested environment. Fleas can also be brought into your home on your clothing, or on your dog after it has played outside.

While not contagious, fleas are transmittable. A flea's strong hind legs enable it to jump from host to host, so if your dog comes into physical contact with another animal or environment that has fleas, it can get fleas too.

A common place to contact fleas is the great outdoors. Fleas lay their eggs in tall grass and when these eggs merge into adulthood, they can easily jump to their new home – your dog. Flea eggs can also get into your dog's fur if it rolls around on the ground. While a flea that merely jumps onto your dog is easy to kill with preventative care, the problem really starts when the flea hatching process occurs on your dog's body.

Once an adult flea has found its new home, it continues to feed on the blood →

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of your dog and lay eggs. These eggs then hatch and larvae emerge, feeding on your dog as well. These larvae cocoon themselves, eventually hatching into adult fleas. The cycle repeats itself but this time with many more adult fleas.

Some eggs will fall off the dog and into the environment. This means that not only will your dog become infected, but its bed, kennel and any resting area will become contaminated as well. Only five per cent of fleas end up living on your dog making it just as important to de-flea your home.

When you have two or more dogs, the cycle can be very burdensome as, when one dog has fleas, your other dogs are bound to get them too. "It's really important to treat all of the animals in the household," Dr Heather Shortridge, veterinarian at the Armidale Veterinary Hospital says and, in a country area, this means your farm dogs too. "Sometimes people won't treat their farm dogs, but they'll treat their house dogs, so they're always going to have fleas in the environment."

Ticks can be found anywhere, but are most common along the Australian coastline, particularly in spring and early summer. Each year, thousands of dogs are infected with diseases transmitted by ticks.

Ticks in Australia include the brown dog tick and the bush tick, however, the most common, and dangerous, is the paralysis tick. Known as the Icodes holocyclus, the paralysis tick lies waiting in vegetation and when an animal passes, it attaches, sucks the blood and injects a neurotoxin called Holocyclotoxin, which is what causes the paralysis in the dog. A good way to distinguish which tick is on your dog is by looking at its leg. "If the legs in the middle are different colours to the front and back legs, then that's a paralysis tick," Heather explains. "But I think with ticks, if in doubt, have it checked out."

Paralysis ticks can cause a loss of appetite, difficulty swallowing, weak limbs and a change to the bark. Eventually, if not treated, paralysis ticks can lead to a coma, respiratory problems and even death.

Treatment

You will usually know whether your dog has fleas by its excessive scratching. If your dog is allergic to fleas or ticks, it may start to bite its skin and it may lose fur.

If not treated properly, fleabites can turn into something more harmful to your dog. "A lot of animals will be hypersensitive to fleas so just one flea bite is enough

Lifecycle of a tick

Once they hatch, ticks undergo three stages of development over their year-long lifecycle. Most species must feed on a host's blood to transition to the next stage.

Eggs
Adult female ticks typically lay up to 3000 eggs that are incubated for 40-60 days.



Larvae
Larvae have six legs and feed on the blood of small mammals and birds.



Nymphs
Nymphs have all eight legs, but are not yet sexually mature.



Adults
Ticks reach their final development stage when they are sexually mature.



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A lot of animals are hypersensitive to fleas so just one flea bite is often enough to cause itches and therefore scratching.

to set them off. They'll get really itchy around the base of the tail. The problem then is that they start traumatising themselves because they'll scratch and scratch and scratch and they'll create a lot of the damage. They'll get really horrible hotspots where they'll get moist, red infected areas and they'll be really uncomfortable," Heather says.

There are different ways to treat fleas and ticks depending on the problem that presents itself. "Sometimes we'll have to use different types of anti-inflammatories, sometimes we'll use antibiotics and sometimes we use topical creams," Heather says.

Once you have removed the tick, visit the vet to see if there are any signs of paralysis. Do not delay this check, because that is the best time to institute treatment if it is required.

With ticks, Dr Tammy Acciari, veterinarian from the Central Coast Veterinary Centre at North Wyong says that the priority should always be removing the tick from the dog's body rather than killing it. To do this, you can use a pair of tweezers or a specific tick twister.

She then recommends seeing a veterinarian immediately. "Once you have removed the tick, visit the vet to see if there are any signs of paralysis. Do not delay this check, because that is the best time to institute treatment if it is required. It is a good idea to take the removed tick with you in a plastic sleeve to the vet, so they can check if it was a paralysis tick or a bush tick."

The Central Coast Veterinary Centre at North Wyong sees cases of tick paralysis all year and has two ventilators on hand. In the case of a paralysis tick, breathing can be paralysed. The ventilator breathes for the dog to allow the animal to recover.

The best form of treatment, however, is prevention. →



Cleaning your home

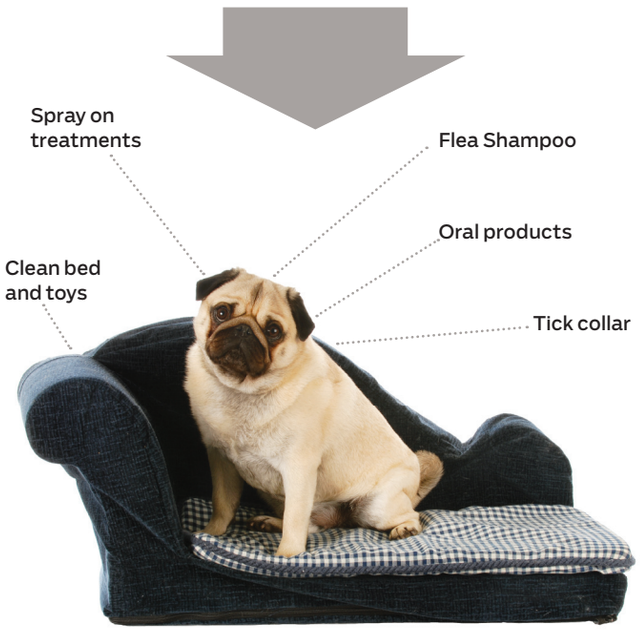
Getting rid of fleas and ticks from your dog is one thing, however, to ensure they don't return, it's just as important to clean your home.

- First, you need to deal with your dog's belongings. Wash bedding and soft toys in hot water to kill any fleas. Remember to clean each dog's bedding and toys and leave them to dry in the sun.
- You then need to clean the overall environment. Any bed your dog has rested on, needs the linen washed in hot water and, again, left to dry in the sun. Mattresses need to be vacuumed thoroughly.
- All of the flooring needs to be vacuumed as well, and the bag needs to be immediately disposed of.
- Couches need to be steamed, especially if that tends to be a place where your dog rests.
- Don't forget to clean your car completely if your dog frequently accompanies you on trips.

These processes needs to be done regularly in order to keep fleas at bay.

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Tick proofing your dog





Avoid fleas and ticks

The use of flea and tick prevention products is generally a good starting point. However, it is imperative you use the products according to what it says on the packaging and, if unsure, always check with your veterinarian. It is also important to continue to use flea and tick control products all year round, not just in the warmer months. "Once you are in the routine of regular flea and tick control, it will just become another routine part of looking after your dog. The most common mistake is, once it is controlled, to slacken off instead of keeping the program going to prevent another infestation," Tammy says.

Prevention methods for fleas include treatments such as spot-on products, flea shampoos and spray on treatments. For ticks, you can fit your dog with a tick collar and there are products on the market that can be used topically. However, tick collars must be changed regularly and require care when fitted. "They are not suitable for puppies and must be placed on correctly so they do not slip off and get eaten," Tammy says. Oral products tend to have an advantage because you don't miss any area of your dog when administering it.

For multiple dogs, you must treat all of them, even if only one dog displays symptoms. "You must treat all in-contact pets with an appropriate product otherwise your flea control strategy is doomed to fail," Tammy says. Heather recommends purchasing products in bulk to save some money and ensuring that all dogs are checked and treated at the same time saves time.

Tammy also recommends getting a tick reminder for the fridge that beeps when prevention control is due again. Another useful tip when it comes to saving cost with multiple pets is taking out pet insurance. This covers or lowers the cost of some treatments, which is especially important when it comes to a pricey concern like tick paralysis.

With ticks, it is also important for you to check your dog daily. Until they feed, ticks are quite difficult to see. However, if you can find a tick before it has been there too long, chances are the effect won't be that bad. A veterinarian should still check your dog, as there may be some residual poison left by the tick.

> **By having really good flea control, owners can do a huge amount to reduce what their pets have to go through.**


Heather Shortridge

Spot-on treatments, tablets and sprays will help to alleviate the chances of your dog getting fleas or ticks. However, it is not completely preventable. "It's one of those things that is not 100 per cent avoidable because there are fleas everywhere but, by having really good flea control, owners can do a huge amount to reduce what their pets have to go through," Heather says.

Treating the environment is just as important in ensuring your pet doesn't fall victim to fleas or ticks. "Remember, the fleas you see on the pet may only be up to five per cent of the burden. The rest of the flea cycle is in your carpets and the environment," Tammy says. This means making sure the grass is mowed, removing excess leaves and blocking off access to under the house. It also means regular vacuuming indoors and frequent washing of blankets and toys. •••

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