

Fleas, Fleas, and More Fleas!

Veterinarians often hear the following phrase, and we love to hear it. "I don't use flea medications because my pets don't have fleas." Veterinarians make a lot of money off of this phrase. Many people never see the fleas on their pets. Many people get lucky that the fleas on their pets do not reproduce successfully...for a time. However, almost everyone's luck runs out sooner or later, and then it's time for a trip to the veterinarian that could have been avoided. Rest assured, if you have not seen fleas on your pet, the fleas on your pet have seen you.

This may come as a shocker for a good many people, but the main part of flea season in Georgia is not summer. The real flea season actually occurs in the autumn. The time period from Labor Day to Thanksgiving brings with it the highest numbers of fleas we see all year. Just at the time of year when many people are beginning to stop their flea control medications because they think we are past the time of worry. This is because in June, July, and August when it's too hot outside for us and our pets, it's also too hot outside for the fleas. While they are present during this time, their numbers then do not compare to what happens in the fall. The following are some common myths about fleas heard by veterinarians nearly every day. Some of these are paraphrased from VeterinaryPartner.com. The link to the whole article follows at the end of this news item.

My pet cannot have fleas because if there were any fleas they would be biting (insert name of a person in the family reportedly sensitive or allergic to flea bites). Since this person is not being bitten, there must not be any fleas. Despite the flea's ability to feed on a wide variety of hosts, it definitely does not prefer human blood and won't eat it unless absolutely necessary. A newly emerged adult flea is hungry and may well take a blood meal from the first warm body it finds. An adult flea knocked off its normal host will also be desperate to find a new host and may feed on the nearest warm body it can find. In general, adult fleas regard human blood as a last choice and humans tend not to be bitten unless flea population numbers are high.

We do not have fleas because we have only hard wood floors. Flea larvae and pupae (cocoons) love to develop in the cracks between the boards of hard wood floors, along baseboards, and any other cracks and crevices. However, contrary to popular belief, adult fleas are obligate parasites. This means that they do not jump on a host, take a blood meal, and then jump off until it's time to eat again; they jump on their host and stay there. There are only a very few unusual scenarios that one may actually find adult fleas in the environment; most people will never see these events.

My pet cannot have fleas because I would see them. Not seeing fleas is poor proof of being flea-free. Only in severely infested pets is one likely to find fleas easily. Veterinarians, with all of their practice and expertise, will tell you that finding low numbers of fleas is often an impossible task even in bright fluorescent lighting on short-haired white animals with thin coats. Fleas are very small, smaller than many people imagine. Also, one may not see fleas in some pets as many animals are adept at licking them away. Finding fleas may be further complicated if the pet is being treated for fleas with ineffective products, because they may reduce flea numbers just enough to make it hard to find the ones they didn't kill. By the time you find the first flea, chances are high that you are overrun.

My pet has a white haircoat so I would see fleas. Because fleas are so small in size, that they are often easily missed even in white, thin-coated pets especially when they are few in number. As many as 90% of flea infested pets are thought to be flea-free by their owners.

My pet is protected from fleas because he only goes outside for about five minutes a day into a fenced in backyard. Opossums, raccoons, stray cats, and other critters respect no fences and will often find their way into fenced-in areas bringing their fleas with them. Many people never see these animals because they are often nocturnal, but when they leave the environment at sunrise, they leave behind flea eggs.

My pet cannot have fleas because he lives 100% indoors. Fleas thrive particularly well in the well-regulated temperatures in the home. Those fleas left behind from the passing animals mentioned above can and do hitch rides on humans frequently and find their way into our homes.

The winter will kill the fleas so I can stop my flea medications. We actually see many flea problems start in the winter for this very reason. This is Georgia...the fleas never, ever go away. Further, if you stop your flea protection, there is a good chance you may be stopping your protection against other parasites as well. Remember this...in the winter if you are warm and happy in your house, and your pet is warm and happy in your house, then your pet's fleas are also warm and happy in your house.

I can get the same stuff online or from the local department store. There is a plethora of flea medications available now for monthly use. Some are safe, some are not. Some are effective, some are not. They are not all created equal and they do not all contain the same ingredients. Veterinarians are your best source of information. Dr. Google is often your worst source of information.

Flea infestation means my pet has dozens to hundreds of fleas or more. Infestation means only that a parasite is present on a particular host or in a particular environment without regard to numbers of parasites. From a veterinary point of view the finding of a single flea equals infestation.

Having fleas on my pets and in my home means I am an unclean person or housekeeper. Not at all. It only means that you live in Georgia and you need to step up the flea control with a little bit of veterinary guidance.

I can't afford to give the better monthly flea preventives. You can't afford not to use flea preventives. Most flea preventives recommended by veterinarians are very effective for prevention, but once a flea infestation has established even a little bit, it's a whole new ball game. The name of the new game is flea TREATMENT not flea PREVENTION. Costs in money, time, and stress for treatment are significantly higher than those associated with prevention. "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" was never more true!

Over-the-counter flea products are just as good as what I can get from my veterinarian. Some are. Some aren't. But if you don't know what questions to ask, figuring out the choices is challenging at best and perilous at worst, and unfortunately, internet research does very little to help clear it up. This is where your veterinarian can help you. He or she is trained specifically in this arena and is well aware of flea biology and flea control measures and is your best source of information.

A few other notes

- 🕒 Fleas cause flea bite dermatitis
- 🕒 Fleas cause flea bite ALLERGIC dermatitis
- 🕒 Fleas bite dermatitis and flea bite allergic dermatitis can cause secondary bacterial and fungal infections
- 🕒 Fleas can carry other infectious diseases, some of which may be transmittable to humans

- ⌚ Fleas transmit tapeworms
- ⌚ Fleas are feeding with 10 to 20 seconds of being on a new host
- ⌚ Fleas are laying eggs in less than 48 hours after their first blood meal
- ⌚ Fleas can lay up to 40 to 50 eggs per day
- ⌚ Fleas in the pupal/cocoon stage can survive in the environment for months

Here is the link to the article referenced above: <http://www.veterinarypartner.com/Content.plx?P=A&S=0&C=0&A=3237>. Suffice to say that the philosophy at *Friendship Springs Veterinary Care* is to use your flea protection every month of every year of your pet's life. Its what Dr. Cutchin and his staff do.