



Natural Flea Control for Your Pet

Fleas have been the scourge of mankind throughout history. Not only are they annoying, but they bring us disease such as Typhus and the Bubonic Plague. In an altruistic example of one parasite helping another, fleas can also transmit tapeworms to both people and their pets. The tapeworms then sap the animal's energy, making it a more attractive host for fleas. It's no wonder that the tiny flea has been mankind's enemy in a battle that has lasted for millennia.

Even today, with all the poisons and chemicals that modern science has brought to bear against them, fleas continue to triumph, becoming stronger and more troublesome than ever. Every year pharmaceutical companies come out with another product or treatment to battle the flea epidemic—a newer, harsher one, or perhaps a hormonal treatment that is intended to win the flea war. Yet somehow, however, there always seems to be the need for next year's newer, better pharmaceutical weapon. Humans are disturbingly efficient at wiping out a whole species, yet our war against the flea continues to fail.

The puzzling state of affairs becomes less puzzling when one looks at the situation from a holistic point of view. The flea is, after all, a predator. And, like any predator, it will seek out the weakest member of the herd. Chemical toxins and insecticides used to kill fleas have the side-effect of weakening our pets when they come into contact with these chemicals, and a weaker pet is more attractive to a flea.

In holistic medicine, treating the underlying cause of a problem is of paramount importance. Treating only the symptoms will cause the patient, ultimately, to worsen. For example, just prescribing painkillers for arthritis allows the patient to be more mobile, but this leads to quicker degeneration of the joints. However, treating arthritis with antioxidants and nutritional support for the joint cartilage can lead to real improvement. Treating fleas can be viewed in the same way; from a holistic point of view, the flea itself is not the problem, but merely a symptom. The disease is not the flea. It is the animal's weakened state of health, so this is where we must focus our attention if we want to have long-term success against fleas. We have much better success when we treat the whole animal and pay attention to diet, overall state of health, and eliminating toxins from their food and environment. This means we must not use insecticides to kill fleas! The best long-term success will be found by using nontoxic methods.

Overall improvement of our pet's diet is the first place to start improving their health and making them more resistant to all disease, including flea infestation. For more information on diets, please contact our office.

If your pet is living a healthy lifestyle and is still picking up fleas, be sure to use nontoxic means to remove the vermin. A flea comb is the least toxic method of removing fleas, and usually pets really enjoy being groomed with one. I recommend spending five minutes a day grooming your pets with a flea comb. This is especially important with long-haired pets who need the extra stimulation to help bring out normal secretions from the oil glands onto their skin. The fleas removed with the flea comb are easily drowned in a little soapy water.

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Shampooing is another effective way to remove both fleas and the “flea dirt” (excrement) they leave behind. However, you must be sure not to use harsh chemicals, insecticides, or soaps that can dry out the skin and compromise the pet. I recommend using a natural, herbal shampoo such as Natural Animal’s Shampoo and Dip Concentrate or Halo’s Cloud Nine Herbal Shampoo.

Be careful when buying “herbal” or “natural” shampoos, though. Some may contain some herbs along with insecticides just so the company can put “herbal” on the label. This misleads people into thinking they are purchasing a nontoxic product. This is especially true of products containing pyrethrums, which come from the flower heads of chrysanthemums. Although pyrethrums come from a flower and are therefore “natural” or “herbal,” they aren’t necessarily nontoxic. Pyrethrums are insecticides and can be toxic (especially when enhanced with Piperonyl Butoxide).

Some people find that using a lemon-skin tonic provides relief to their pets. Thinly slice a lemon (including the peel) and add it to a pint of nearly boiling water, then let it steep overnight. The next day, sponge the solution onto your pet’s skin and let it dry. You can use this daily for severe skin problems involving fleas. It will help tone the skin and will even help repel parasites.

Diatomaceous earth (diatom dust) is another nontoxic way to combat fleas, both on your pet and in your environment. This product is made from the fossilized remains of one-celled algae. The fine particles attack the waxy coating that covers the outside of the fleas, which then causes the fleas to dry out and die. The dust can be spread around the home and worked into the bedding and carpeted areas where the pet spends most of their time. You can also use it like a flea powder directly on your pet between baths. Be cautious using it directly on the pet and around small children, as it is extremely dusty and can cause minor throat and lung irritation if inhaled. Also, be sure to only use *human grade, unprocessed* diatomaceous earth to ensure its safety. The heat-processed diatomaceous earth used in swimming pools filters, for example, can cause silicosis if inhaled.

Another important flea-control measure is to launder your pet’s bedding frequently in hot, soapy water and dry it on high heat. Also, regularly vacuum your rugs and furniture to pick up flea eggs—discard the vacuum bag, since hundreds of eggs may be inside and ready to hatch and re-infest your home.

If your pet goes outdoors it is important to treat this area as well to prevent a new batch of fleas from being picked up on every outing. Diatomaceous earth can be applied in your garden, as it is very useful against many types of garden pests. Also, use diatomaceous earth in your bark dust, as fleas love to live in bark chips and will even survive mild winters in them. Another effective outdoor flea-control product is parasitic nematodes. They are found in products such as Interrupt. These microscopic worms seek out and kill flea larvae and pupae. They generally kill almost all the immature fleas within 24 hours and will continue to kill new larvae that hatch out for several weeks. This product is safe for our pets and the environment.

Many people find that feeding nutritional yeast and garlic to their pet can make their pet less attractive to fleas. This works better for some pets than others, but as it does no harm, we think that it is definitely worth trying.