

Safer Flea & Tick Strategies

A Fact Sheet from Toxic Free NC

Flea season can mean misery for scratching pets and their people. Fleas and ticks can spread potentially dangerous pathogens to your pets, and many pets have sensitive skin and suffer more than others from flea bites. But many flea and tick products emit a steady stream of pesticides that can harm pets and people, leaving many of us in a quandary. Here are some pointers for flea and tick avoidance and treatments.

Prevention and Safer Treatment

When the summer starts and you notice some scratching or a few fleas in your house, take immediate action with a good bath in lukewarm water. A standard pet shampoo is plenty to drown and kill fleas – “flea dips” and other pesticide treatments are an unnecessary use of toxics. Use a flea comb to monitor flea populations, dropping any fleas you catch in warm, soapy water. Your pet will enjoy the extra grooming!

Vacuum your house several times a week, especially carpeting and any places your pets sleep, throwing away the vacuum bag about once a week. Simply vacuuming can remove the vast majority of flea eggs and nymphs from your house (adult fleas make up only about 5% of the actual flea population). To kill adult fleas, you can use diatomaceous earth (DE) as directed on carpets and pet bedding, and even directly on the pet. Follow the directions on the DE package carefully – a little bit goes a long way. DE is not a poison – it is a dust made up of tiny fossils with jagged edges that slice up and dry out the fleas. It is highly effective, even against a serious flea infestation. Inhaling large amounts of DE can irritate the windpipe and lungs (not to mention clogging your vacuum cleaner), so be careful to use no more than you really need.

Making Flea Traps

Flea traps are a great way to monitor the flea population to determine whether you have fleas in the house, and where they are hiding. For a small flea problem, a trap may be enough to get rid of all of them. Simply place a pan of soapy water in the middle of the room with a lit candle in the center of the pan. Be sure that nothing can touch the candle and cause a fire hazard. Leave the pan in the dark room overnight – the light and heat will attract fleas, who will then hop into their doom in the soapy water. You will be able to count the fleas in the pan in the morning to determine whether you’ve just got some stragglers, or a real problem in the house.

For pets who spend lots of time outdoors, or who are extremely sensitive to bites, prevention sometimes isn’t enough. Be extremely careful when choosing flea and tick products for your pets. Some flea and tick products still on the market, such as the notorious Hartz flea & tick drops for cats and kittens, can injure or even kill pets. And remember that whatever you slather your pet in comes back to you every time you pet and snuggle him, so choose wisely.

Relative Risk of Flea & Tick Control Practices

Lowest Risk	Frequent baths, flea combing and vacuuming
Lower Risk	Diatomaceous earth (can be used on pet, bedding and carpet), flea traps
Moderate Risk	Infrequent topical treatments (some contain pyrethroid insecticides that are very toxic to cats). Choose carefully in consultation with your veterinarian.
Higher Risk	Flea dips, sprays and collars for pets, weekly or other frequent treatments
Highest Risk	Fogging and bombing, indoor flea sprays

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Many flea & tick treatments rely on a pesticide barrier that exposes you and your pets continuously to insecticides.

High-risk flea and tick treatments are not recommended. Many people turn to these toxic concoctions in itchy desperation, only to find that they are not very effective, and may even make them or their pets feel sick. Flea collars, sprays and flea dips rely on a constant pesticide barrier to keep fleas and ticks off the pets, meaning that your pet is constantly exposed to these chemicals, as are you every time you pet or cuddle them. You can avoid such dangerous exposures by following the recommendations above for flea prevention, and carefully selecting any flea and tick products to be used sparingly.

More resources on the web

- “Managing Fleas without Poisons,” an excellent article from NCAP, with an informative section on commonly-available pesticides: <http://www.pesticide.org/fleas.html>
- Archived article on flea and tick control from *Mother Earth News*, with great strategies for tick suppression: http://www.motherearthnews.com/Livestock_and_Farming/2002_August_September/Flea_and_Tick_Control
- Beyond Pesticides, “Flea Control” contains helpful information about flea biology & life cycles: <http://www.beyondpesticides.org/alternatives/factsheets/index.htm>
- You can research common ingredients in flea control products at: <http://www.pesticideinfo.org>.

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