

# FLEAS

## ZONOOSES FACTSHEET

Diseases that spread from animals to people

### WHAT ARE THEY?



Fleas are small jumping insects that live on dogs, cats and other animals.

The flea that lives on dogs and cats is called the cat flea (*Ctenocephalides felis*). Fleas live in the fur. They bite the skin and eat blood to survive and reproduce. They lay eggs in the fur which can grow into adult fleas, or can drop out of the fur to grow elsewhere.

Fleas can bite humans, but human blood is not enough nutritious to support the fleas for long. Fleas cannot lay eggs in human hair.

### HOW DO THEY SPREAD?

1 female flea can lay up to  
50 eggs per day.

Fleas lay eggs in dog and cat fur which drop out of the coat and into the environment when the animal moves (like a salt shaker!). Flea eggs can survive in the environment, hatch when the weather is right and jump onto other animals and people. Flea eggs like to hatch most in warm, wet weather.

### WHAT DO THEY DO?

Fleas make animals  
and humans itchy.



**Fleas suck blood.** Animals that lose lots of blood can have *anaemia* (weak blood), making the animal weak and sleepy and can cause death.

**Fleas cause skin disease in animals.** Fleas moving and biting skin causes itching. Animals with many fleas can be very itchy, which can cause hair loss, skin dryness and thickening. Skin that is damaged can easily become infected. Some animals are allergic to flea saliva, so that only one bite from one flea can make them incredibly itchy. Animals with fleas or flea allergy usually have coat changes on their back near the tail.

**Fleas can cause other diseases in humans.** Fleas bites can make humans itchy, causing people to scratch their skin and make sores. Sores can become infected with bacteria (such as *Streptococcus spp.*) leading to other diseases such as rheumatic heart disease and kidney disease. Fleas can also spread blood diseases to humans by biting (e.g. cat scratch disease).

### HOW DO YOU TREAT THEM?



**Treat the animal.** The most effective flea treatments are registered tablet/chews or spot-ons (such as Frontline, Nexgard, Bravecto). These stay in the animal's blood for 1 month or longer, killing fleas every time they take a blood meal. Other treatments, such as sprays, flea washes and flea collars, help to kill fleas but do not work as well. The vet may also recommend some treatments such as antibiotics or soothing creams or washes to help the skin.



**Treat the environment.** Fleas will keep coming back as long as fleas and flea eggs are still around. Make sure all animals in the household are treated. Wash all bedding, toys and other materials that may be housing fleas/flea eggs.



**Practice good hygiene.** Wash hands often. Keep sores clean to prevent infection.

For more information: please contact AMRRIC on (08) 8948 1768, email us at [info@amrric.org](mailto:info@amrric.org) or visit our website: [www.amrric.org](http://www.amrric.org)

#### REFERENCES

- Restrepo, C., 2016, Flea Allergy, World Small Animal Conference Proceedings, Veterinary Information Network. <https://www.vin.com/doc/?id=8249701>.  
Phelan, S., 2010, Dog Health Programs in Indigenous Communities – an Environmental Health Practitioner's Guide, AMRRIC. <https://www.amrric.org/resources/ehp-manual/>

Image 1: A flea viewed at 10x magnification, courtesy of Dr Amelia White <https://veterinarypartner.vin.com/default.aspx?pid=19239&id=7955321>;  
Image 2: A dog with evidence of flea allergy dermatitis, characterised by hair loss and skin thickening on its back, courtesy of AMRRIC; Image 3: Frontline Plus for cats <https://frontlinepetcare.com.au/products/frontline-plus-cats>; Image 4: Washed blanket drying on washing line, courtesy of AMRRIC. Other images are stock images.