

THE FLEA

There are over one thousand different species in the flea family (Order Siphonaptera) and there seems to be one designed to feed on most warm-blooded and for eradication purposes we may regard them as the same. They are physically almost identical and are not too choosy whether they feed on a dog, cat or you or I.

They are dark red-brown in appearance, laterally very thin with large and very strong hind legs, which allow them to jump hundreds of times their own height. Their exoskeleton is of a very tough material called Chitin and they are almost impossible to crush by hand or even under a fingernail. They are almost totally blind and locate their host by jumping towards approaching animals located by vibrations.

Habits and Life Cycle

Live fleas will usually be introduced into the home by a cat or a dog. When they have fed by sucking a belly full of blood they will wait until the host comes to rest and hop off onto the floor, chair, bed or wherever the animal is resting at the time. The fleas will not 'dismount' while the animal is in motion therefore its favourite resting-places will be those most heavily infested. The female lays 4-8 eggs after each blood meal and may lay several hundred during the year.

The larvae are white and maggot-like but only 1.5 mm in length growing to 5 mm when ready to pupate. They feed on organic debris likely to be present in most animals sleeping quarters such as particles of waste food, skin, partially digested blood from adult fleas and their host's faecal matter.

When fully grown the larvae spin a silken cocoon, cover themselves with dirt and pupate. However, unlike most insects this stage occurs in no fixed time, as even though metamorphosis is complete the adult flea will not emerge until a host of some sort is nearby. Vibrations of an animal or person visiting will stimulate "hatching". This is why large-scale attacks are reported in houses that have not been visited for some time. The vibrations in the floor cause fleas to break out of their cocoons en masse, and seek their host by jumping blindly into the air. Similar heavy attacks may be experienced when the animal host is suddenly lost or dies leaving the fleas with nothing to feed from.

Control

Cleanliness is the primary aid to control. Where pets are involved their bedding is best destroyed (burning or disposed of in a sealed plastic bag) and any dust and debris moved from the area. Cleaning should be thorough and for this reason washable baskets are preferred to wood or wicker.

All other possible breeding sites should be cleaned, such as dirty floors, floor coverings, and where no floor covering is present, gaps in floor boards are particularly prone to accumulations of debris. Anything beyond cleaning should be burned or sealed in plastic bag and disposed of along with the contents of the vacuum cleaner.

Flea larvae cannot survive in thoroughly clean conditions.

Pets should be treated using a veterinary product.

Finally, spraying by the local authority will kill any live insects and its residual effect will destroy any hatching out within the next few weeks. A second treatment is not usually necessary.