

# FACT SHEET

## Fleas

### Ctenocephalides felis



There are about 60 different species of flea in Britain. All species are parasites (i.e. they need a host animal to live off). Many of these are associated with particular animals, so the dog flea, cat flea, and bird flea are all slightly different species. The human flea is very rare, but unfortunately although the different species of flea prefer to feed on their specific host, they will bite other hosts if they are hungry enough. Most of the flea infestations found in houses and on people are cat fleas.

Although still common, fleas have problems living in modern houses, as they like a little humidity and undisturbed surroundings. Central heating, vacuum cleaners and regular washing of bedding in washing machines all make life more difficult for the flea than in previous centuries. Although during an infestation of fleas you will often find them on pets, or may see one on your clothing, these fleas are only moving out from their living areas to feed. They do not live on the host animal all the time.



### Life Cycle

The life cycle starts with a female flea laying eggs. These eggs are not usually found on the animal, but are on the floor or in the animal's bedding area. The eggs hatch into larvae within 2 or 3 days and feed on any debris they can find in the cracks of floorboards and around areas where cats, dogs or birds have their regular bedding or resting places. After about 3 – 4 weeks the larvae spin a silk cocoon and inside this cocoon they turn into the adult flea. The adult flea needs some passing vibration to stimulate it to leave the cocoon. This may happen within a few days in an occupied house, but where the house is unoccupied; the fleas may remain dormant for many months. This is why entering an empty house or shed may result in a sudden and large number of flea bites, as the fleas are starving and will bite at anything. A more normal situation is where a single flea is brought into the house by a domestic pet and the infestation then builds up until it is suddenly noticed. To complete the life cycle, the flea has to have a drink of host blood before it can lay breed and lay fertile eggs. An adult flea is a tiny insect around the size of a pin head and dark brown in colour. Though you may see these adults it is important to realise that killing the odd flea seen jumping or only treating pet animals even with professional products will not bring the infestation under control. The answer is to have a full survey and treatment of the whole house and any affected areas. If you have any pets, particularly cats and dogs they must be treated with an approved flea treatment in tandem with any other premises treatment that is being considered. Your veterinary surgeon will be able to advise you on the best pet treatments on offer.

Should you choose a premises treatment it is important to use a professional pest control operator to carry out the treatment; they have access to a range of insecticides which are far more effective than those on sale to the general public and also they have the training and knowledge to ensure that a thorough and effective job is done. A professional treatment remains effective for several weeks and will kill all larvae and adult fleas that come into contact with it. After the insecticide wears away; there is always the risk that a pet animal could bring more fleas into the house, so be vigilant when taking pets for walks or even visiting other houses. Remember that it only takes one egg-bound female flea entering your premises to start the whole cycle off again.

For any treatment to be effective there are certain actions you the householder needs to take before and after any treatment provided, all responsible companies will advise you what you must do.

