



## WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT EXTERNAL PARASITES

*(Paraphrased from: American Veterinary Medical Association, Feb 2004)*

At some point in their lives, many pets experience discomfort caused by external parasites such as fleas, ticks, or mites on their skin or in their ears. These parasites can be extremely irritating to pets and can cause serious skin problems or even carry disease. Modern medicines make treatment, control, and prevention of many external parasites much easier than in the past.

### FLEAS

**Flea Basics:** Fleas thrive when the weather is warm and humid. In the Texas Hill Country, fleas may be a year-round problem. Your pet can pick up fleas wherever an infestation exists, often in areas frequented by other cats and dogs. Adult fleas are dark brown, no bigger than a sesame seed, and able to move rapidly over your pet's skin. Adult fleas live their entire lives on your pet. Female fleas begin laying eggs within 24 hours of selecting your pet as a host, producing up to 50 eggs each day. These eggs fall from your pet onto the floor or furniture, including your pet's bed, or onto any other indoor or outdoor area where your pet happens to be. Tiny worm-like larvae hatch from the eggs and, to avoid sunlight, burrow into carpets, under furniture, or into soil before spinning a cocoon. The cocooned flea pupae can lie dormant for weeks before emerging as adults, ready to infest your pet. This gives fleas a life cycle of anywhere from 12 days to 6 months. Knowing where fleas develop helps you to efficiently break their life cycle.

**Risks and Consequences:** You might not even know that your pet has fleas until their number increases to the point that your pet is visibly uncomfortable. Signs of flea problems range from mild irritation to severe itching that can lead to open sores and skin infection. One of the first things you might notice on a pet with fleas is "flea dirt," the black flea droppings left on your pet's coat. Some pets develop an allergy to flea saliva and this condition requires management. Also, pets can become infected with tapeworms if they ingest fleas carrying tapeworm eggs. Young or small pets with heavy flea infestations may become anemic, and in areas with moderate to severe flea infestations, people may experience flea bites. Fleas are capable of transmitting a few other infectious diseases to pets and people, but this is rare.

**Treatment and Control:** Your veterinarian will recommend an appropriate flea control plan for your pet based on your particular needs and the severity of the flea infestation. In addition to treating your pet, you can reduce the flea population in your house by thoroughly cleaning your pet's sleeping quarters and vacuuming floors and any furniture that your pet frequents. Careful and regular vacuuming or cleaning of the pet's living area helps to remove and kill flea eggs, larvae, and pupae. Pay particular attention to carpeted areas and rugs where your pet lies. With moderate and severe flea infestations, treatment of your yard may be necessary in addition to treatment of your home. Oftentimes, professional pest control services are needed for these more intense infestations.

### TICKS

Hosting a tick is the price dogs or, less commonly, cats may pay for investigating shrubbery, brush, or wild undergrowth. Ticks have a four-stage life cycle, and immature ticks often feed on small, wild animals found in forests, prairies, and brush. Adult ticks seek larger hosts like dogs and cats who venture into these habitats. Tick exposure in the Hill Country can be virtually year round.

**Risks and Consequences:** Ticks are most often found around your dog's neck, in the ears, in the folds

between the legs and the body, and between the toes. Cats may have ticks on their neck or face. Tick bites can cause skin irritation. Ticks are also capable of spreading serious infectious diseases to the pets and people on which they feed. Ehrlichiosis, a tick-borne disease that affects the blood of dogs, is wide spread in the Hill Country. Heavy infestations can cause anemia in pets.

Treatment and Control : Prompt removal of ticks is very important because it lessens the chance of disease transmission from the tick to your pet. Remove ticks by carefully using tweezers to firmly grip the tick as close to the pet's skin as possible and gently pulling the tick free. After removing the tick, crush it, avoiding contact with tick fluids that can carry disease. Pets that are at risk for ticks should be treated with an appropriate tick preventative. Your veterinarian can recommend a product that best suits your pet's needs. Owners who take their pets to tick-prone areas during camping, sporting, or hiking trips should examine their pets for ticks immediately on returning home and remove any ticks from their pets. If your pet picks up ticks in the backyard, trimming brush may reduce your pet's exposure to tick habitats.