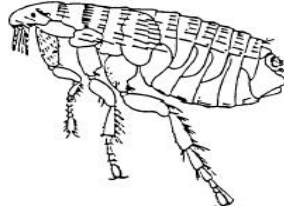


Environmental Health Facts about Fleas



Fleas are small blood-sucking insects that live on animals or in their burrows and nests. During the summer fleas often become a problem around homes in North Carolina. To control fleas, it is important to know some facts about them.

FLEA BIOLOGY

In North Carolina, summertime flea problems are almost always related to pet cats and dogs. *Ctenocephalides felis*, commonly called the cat flea (although it's just as common on dogs), is usually the cause of these problems.

The cat flea has four stages of growth – egg, larva, pupa, and adult.

The adults have no wings, but are able to jump great distances. The adult flea lives on the pet's hair and skin. Once on a pet, the cat flea tends to remain there. The male and female flea feed on blood sucked from the pet's skin. Mating occurs on the pet.

The female flea lays her eggs on the pet, but the eggs are not attached and will usually fall off the pet. Eggs are likely to fall where the pet spends the most time, such as in its bedding. The larva hatches from the egg. This thread-like stage feeds on organic material that has collected in protected places. A large part of the larval food is actually blood that has been passed in the feces of the adult flea. The larva moves around in search of food and shelter. A carpeted floor is a very good place for flea larvae to develop.

In about 14 days, the larval flea prepares a cocoon and enters the pupae stage. When the pupae stage is completed, the adult flea is ready to find a host. The adult can remain inactive for a long time within the cocoon until an animal is present. This is why a house that has been empty for several weeks may be "jumping" with fleas soon after a person enters.

Occasionally, different types of fleas from squirrels, rats, birds, or other wildlife may be a problem around the home.

FLEAS AND DISEASE

Fleas transmit several diseases to humans. Plague and marine typhus occur in the United States, but are not found in North Carolina. However, flea bites can cause skin reactions in both humans and animals. Scratching the bites may lead to infection.

CONTROLLING FLEAS

Because the life cycle of fleas occurs both on and off the pet, fleas can be difficult to control if your efforts are not complete.

Controlling fleas takes three steps.

1. Clean and vacuum to remove flea eggs, larvae, and food. Concentrate in places where the animal often rests. Vacuum carpeting, under furniture, beneath cushions, and around baseboards (discard the contents of the vacuum when finished, fleas may develop inside). Clean beneath the doghouse. Wash pet bedding in hot soapy water.
2. Treat the pet with a suitable dip, shampoo, or dust to kill fleas and prevent their return. Use a flea collar.
3. Treat the surroundings with a suitable insecticide to control fleas. Treatments must be thorough to kill hidden flea larvae. Because the cocoon stage may not be killed by insecticides, new adults might soon be found. Many people have been very pleased with products containing an insect growth regulator (IGR). This chemical prevents larval fleas from becoming adults. IGRs are very safe to humans and pets, last for several months, and work in very small amounts. IGRs do not kill adult fleas so they are usually combined with an insecticide to control adults.

When using any insecticide, it is important to follow label directions carefully.

NEED MORE INFORMATION?

Contact your Local Health Department at 336-597-1790
or the Public Health Pest Management Section at (919)733-6407