

Fleas **by Lloyd Eighme, retired entomologist**

People have problems with fleas everywhere in the world. The fleas are adapted to sucking blood from many different animals. The order Siphonaptera (siphon=sucking mouthparts; aptera=wingless) includes hundreds of different kinds of fleas, but they all look very similar and are not easy to tell apart.

The most common flea in our area is the cat and dog flea (*Ctenocephalides felis*). It not only sucks blood from our pets, but from us as well. There is a human flea that prefers humans, but will also feed on cats, dogs and other animals. The life cycles of these common fleas are all similar, so it is not essential that we tell them apart. There are many remedies and methods of control for fleas that are available either from the store or the veterinarian. However, an understanding of the flea life cycle can help in administering controls and even reduce the amount of pesticides used.

Adult fleas tend to remain on the host animal as much as possible and feed often, taking several blood meals during each 24 hour period. The flea digestive system is actually not very efficient in digesting blood and it must consume large quantities in order to get sufficient nourishment. Small fecal pellets of dried blood are ejected almost constantly. Each female flea may lay several hundred eggs during her life time and the eggs are deposited singly and loosely in the fur covering the body of the host. The cat or dog scratches and shakes its fur scattering flea eggs and dried blood fecal pellets wherever it is resting. The pets bedding is an ideal place for the eggs to hatch into flea larvae. There is protection, warmth and food there in abundance. Flea larvae look like tiny white-ish worms with chewing mouthparts to feed on organic debris and dried fecal blood. They do not bite their host, but the warmth in the bed of the cat or dog will speed up their development and within a week they will spin a silken cocoon in which to pupate. Another week will complete their development to emerge from the cocoon as a fully grown adult flea ready to jump on to the host where it will spend its lifetime sucking blood and reproducing.

Now that you know the flea life cycle, you can better understand how to interfere with its development and reduce its numbers drastically. The first and easiest thing to do is keep the pets bedding clean. A washable bed cloth, laundered each week will prevent re-infection of the host. Medication to kill the fleas on the host will stop the source of flea eggs in the bedding.

Fleas can transmit typhus to humans and tapeworms to dogs and cats. Bubonic plague, a bacterial disease spread to humans by rat fleas, was a scourge in Europe during the 14th to the 17th centuries. Fleas are so common and widespread it is impossible to avoid them completely. With all of the information and medication available to us, we do not have to put up with them like people did who lived hundreds of years ago.

For more information on fleas and how to control them see EB 0472 and EB 0817.