



Fleas, Ticks, FAD

Well summer is almost here and we are all looking forward to the great things that summer brings. Beautiful weather, walking the dog in the daylight after work, trips to the beach and barbecues on balmy evenings. There are 2 things however, that our four legged friends don't look forward to – fleas and paralysis ticks. These little critters can cause a wide range of problems for our pets, from mild skin irritation to severe allergies, and in the case of ticks, paralysis and even death.

So how do we go about protecting our pets from these parasites, and why is it so important? Different approaches are needed for fleas and paralysis ticks, so I shall discuss their control separately. Furthermore, paralysis tick control is only important in pets that live in or are visiting paralysis tick areas.

Flea infestations are extremely common on pets and in the home environment in Sydney, especially in the warmer months of the year. A flea infestation on your pet can have one of several outcomes. In some pets the infestation just causes skin irritation, resulting in scratching. A severe infestation can result in anaemia due to the large volume of blood being consumed by the fleas. In other pets, a flea infestation can result in flea allergy dermatitis. Flea allergy dermatitis (FAD) is the most common skin condition affecting dogs and cats in the world.

Flea allergy dermatitis is the result of an allergic reaction to the saliva of the flea. Affected animals are usually intensely itchy with red skin, hair loss and an unpleasant odour due to secondary infections. Effective flea control is particularly important on pets

with FAD due to the severe skin trauma that can result from a single flea bite. The other compelling reason for all pet owners to practise effective flea control is that fleas are responsible for the production and transmission of several diseases of humans and their pets.

Treatment of flea allergy dermatitis involves elimination of fleas from your pet, prevention of re-infestation from the environment and managing the allergic reaction and itch.

The best products for eliminating fleas from your pets are sprays and spot-ons that are applied to the skin. Your veterinarian can advise you what brands are most effective. Organophosphate (OP) based rinses are very effective at killing fleas but are toxic to both pets and people and are best avoided. If you have a flea rinse at home and are unsure if it is an OP, just check the label. If it is an OP there will be a statement that the product is a "cholinesterase inhibitor".

Eliminating the immature fleas in the environment is essential in preventing re-infestation. Each female flea may lay over 2000 eggs in her lifetime. Good flea control will not be achieved if the environment is not treated. The best approach to environmental control involves regular vacuuming of pet areas and washing of bedding. Dead vegetation should also be removed from pet areas outside. Your veterinarian can recommend products that prevent flea eggs from hatching.

If your pet has flea allergy dermatitis a trip to the vet will be necessary to get the allergy under control. Short courses of anti-inflammatory medication will get the allergy in check. This will involve the use of cortisone type drugs. Used in low doses and for short periods of time these drugs are extremely safe, well tolerated and effective. They are not suitable however for long term use. They are only used while the flea infestation is being resolved.

Paralysis ticks, whilst not as widely distributed as fleas, are nasty little critters that can kill dogs and cats. It is also interesting (if not scary) to note that paralysis ticks have caused more human deaths (20 reported deaths) than any other Australian arachnid, including the funnelweb spider (13 attributable deaths) and the redback spider (14 deaths).

Pets that live in or visit paralysis tick areas should be thoroughly checked on a daily basis, as well as receiving some form of treatment that kills ticks. The paralysis tick lives along the east coast of Australia, extending about 30km inland. They are most abundant between nearly spring and late autumn in areas surrounded by bush. If you are unsure if you are in a tick area (or about to travel to one with your dog) your best bet is to phone the local vet and ask.

There are three types of product that can be used in dogs to kill the paralysis tick. There are tablets that can be given to the dog, sprays and spot-on preparations, and tick collars. You should not use more than one product on your pet at a time. It is important to speak with your vet (or vet nurse) about which products can be used safely in your pet, as well as how to use the product so that it is effective against ticks. It is important to remember that whilst these products are quite effective when used properly, they are not foolproof and are no substitute for thorough daily examination of your dog for ticks.

So while we are all enjoying the great things that summer has to offer, let's not forget about keeping our four legged friends healthy and irritation free.