



A Guide to Fleas



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Alameda County Department of Environmental Health

Appearance

Fleas are small (1/10th -1/8th “), vertically flattened insects that infest and move about the hairs of warm-blooded animals. They are wingless and cannot fly, but they have spring-like legs that allow them to jump long distances relative to their body size.



Behavior

Fleas feed on the blood of dogs, cats, and other warm-blooded animals including humans, however most flea species prefer specific non-human hosts. The **Cat flea, (*Ctenocephalides felis*)** is the most common flea found in homes and feeds primarily on cats, dogs, raccoons and opossums. Another flea, ***Pulex simulans***, prefer skunks and other wildlife, but will readily feed on humans and can invade homes. In most cases, flea infestations originate from household pets. However, fleas may enter your home from a neighbor’s yard or from wildlife (including feral cats) living under the structure, deck or shed. It is also important to know that fleas can remain dormant for several months. Experiencing a large flea infestation after moving into a home which has been vacant for several months is not unusual.

The Norway rat, *Rattus norvegicus*, can be infested with large numbers of **Northern and Oriental rat fleas**. Infestations of these rats in and around the home may promote flea activity and require flea control as well as rodent control. In Alameda County few Roof rats, *R. rattus*, have been found infested with fleas.

Public Health Concern

Certain types of fleas, including the Cat flea, have the potential to transmit diseases such as plague, tularemia, murine typhus, and tapeworm. In Alameda County, however, flea-borne diseases are very rare. Recent research indicates cat fleas are capable of transmitting a murine-like typhus disease in humans named cat flea rickettsiosis. The symptoms are similar to murine typhus but less severe. In some cases, flea bites on people can cause irritating allergic dermatitis. Some pets suffer from fleabite allergic dermatitis causing intense itching and hair loss.



As part of our disease surveillance program, our District collects fleas from wild rodents such as ground squirrels, wood rats, deer mice and voles. Flea species and numbers per animal indicate disease potential and risks for the general public.

Prevention and Control

The first indications of a flea infestation can be seen in pets that scratch or bite themselves more often than usual. Fleas are visible and can be seen on pets and in the environment. When infesting humans, fleas often bite on the ankles or lower legs. If you suspect you are experiencing a flea infestation, walking through suspected areas wearing white socks can help determine if fleas are present in your carpet or flooring.



1131 Harbor Bay Parkway, Ste. 166
Alameda, CA 94502
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The first step in flea control is to determine the source (flea host) of the fleas. In most cases the fleas are feeding on pets, cats or dogs. In some cases the fleas are feeding on wildlife such as raccoons or skunks living under the house or deck. In these cases the animal should be excluded from the structure and entry points sealed. In the case of pets there are various products to treat fleas on your pets. Consult a veterinarian for recommendations.



The next step is to eliminate the existing adult and larval fleas. It is recommended to hire a professional, licensed pest control operator to carry out treatment.

Prior to any treatment, thorough and regular vacuuming is important. Pay close attention to areas where your pet sleeps, rests, or spends time including sofas and beds. Flea larvae hide in cracks, under cushions, pet bedding, and carpets. Laundering pet bedding, sofa covers, and bed coverings is advisable.

There are a number of pesticides on the market for flea control. There are commercially available flea traps or home-made traps can be utilized. Placing a shallow pan filled with detergent and water on the floor with a light source 6" above is also effective in trapping fleas. Using a combination of products is most effective. Monitor your pet for fleas on a regular basis to prevent an infestation.

If you are experiencing flea problems, call our office or submit an online request for service. Our District Biologist will inspect your property and adjacent properties, if necessary, to determine the flea species, the cause of the flea infestation and recommend control measures. Correct flea identification will help to determine the host animal and assist in recommending proper control measures.

