

Flea and Tick Prevention

My puppy pal Stanley once suffered a case of fleas he just couldn't kick. I kept thinking they were gone, and then a week or two later, more would appear. I started referring to his fleas as "the itchy-scratchies" because it sounded friendlier, and I wanted to offer my poor pup whatever solace I could. But let's be honest – there's nothing friendly about persistent parasites that feed on your li'l buddy's blood.

The Nuts and Bolts of Fleas and Ticks

Fleas are wingless insects, and ticks are eight-legged arachnids. Both are parasites that feed off your furry friend's blood and can transmit diseases to your pal and you. Entomologists have identified 2,200 flea types and 800 tick species. It's no wonder that fleas and ticks are two of the most common concerns among pet parents.

Flea Facts

Fleas thrive in warmer temperatures (65-80° F) and live anywhere between a couple weeks to a full year with their lifespan including egg, larvae, pupae, and adult stages. An adult female can produce as many as 50 eggs in a single day, which can result in tens of thousands of fleas in just a couple months.

Making matters worse, the pupal stage lasts 8-13 days, and these barely perceptible whitish cocoons can be hidden in your pup's fur as well as in your carpet, upholstery, bedding, or yard. This explains why I kept thinking my pal Stanley's fleas were long gone when, really, they were just waiting to emerge.

Contrary to popular belief, fleas don't bite. They attach to your pal by inserting their proboscis (a long tubular organ) under the skin and sucking like you would from a straw.

Tick Basics

Ticks are prevalent in the wooded areas of the Northeast but live in virtually any warm climate. They prefer tall grasses and thick brush and are typically more active in late spring and summer. Tick types – and the transmittable diseases that correspond – are closely tied to geographic location, so it's a good idea to speak with your veterinarian about which tick species live nearby.

Particular life cycles are dependent upon species, but in general ticks follow four stages – egg, larvae, nymph, and adult – with the latter two being the stages where they attach to your pup. Unlike fleas, ticks do bite. They also bury their heads under the skin and gorge. An adult female can grow as much as 100 times its original size when feeding!



Symptoms

If your pup has fleas, you may notice “flea dirt” before you spot any critters. This dark dusting is actually flea droppings. Additional signs include:

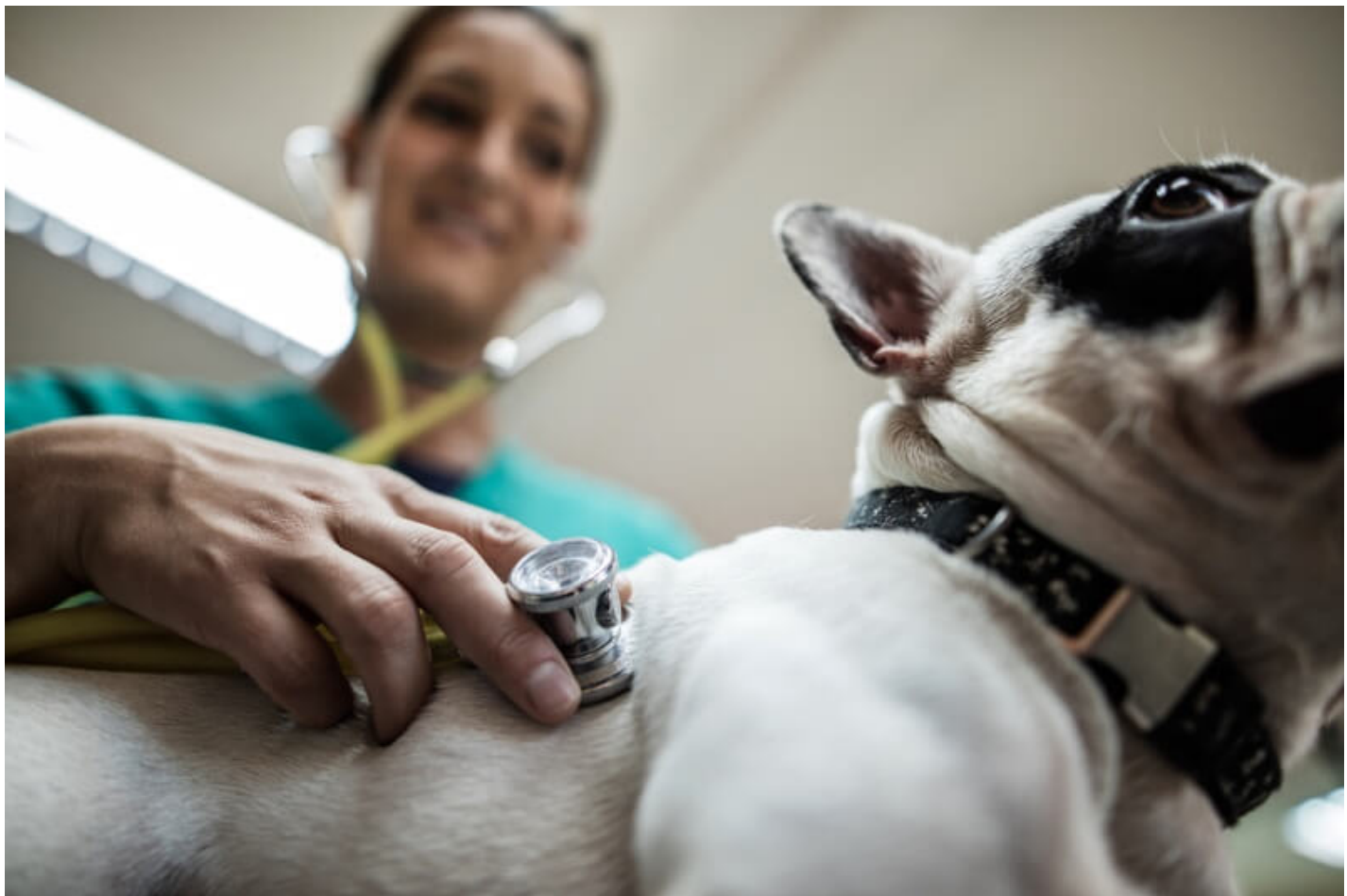
- Flea eggs (tiny white grains in the fur)
- Hair loss
- [Scabs or hot spots](#)
- Pale lips or gums

Just like my nickname “the itchy-scratchies” indicates, a flea infestation causes major discomfort for your furry friend. Be on the lookout for behavioral changes like:

- Restlessness
- Excessive itching, scratching, [licking](#), or biting
- Frequent head shaking
- Skin twitching

Fleas can carry infectious agents, like tapeworm eggs and certain bacteria, so it’s a good idea to also note any changes in eating habits or general well-being.

Ticks, while easier to see, can be harder to notice. This is because ticks don’t usually cause your li'l buddy physical discomfort, and you may not notice any change until your dog exhibits symptoms of the diseases passed on through ticks. That’s why it’s important to inspect your pal regularly and speak with your veterinarian any time you notice a behavioral change.



Flea and Tick Complications

Severe flea and tick infestations can lead to anemia or excessive blood loss. In puppies and kittens, a shortage of red blood cells can be life threatening, so call your veterinarian right away if you have any concerns. Some doggies develop flea allergy dermatitis, an [allergic reaction](#) to flea saliva, and may need prescription allergy medication.

With ticks, pups can also suffer from skin irritations, as well as a nervous system disorder called tick paralysis. But the main concern is that ticks can transmit diseases, such as [Lyme disease](#) and Cytauxzoonosis. Some conditions can even cause coma or death, so it's important to call your [veterinarian](#) if your dog experiences:

- Fever
- Swollen joints or lymph nodes
- Loss of appetite
- Kidney troubles
- Jaundice
- Difficulty breathing
- Depression

Diagnosis

Your veterinarian can do a simple physical examination to confirm an infestation. If there is any concern about anemia or additional complications, blood work and special tests may be necessary. If your dog has suffered a tick bite, it's a good idea to bring the tick with you to your appointment if possible. This will help your veterinarian determine the species and associated transmittable diseases.

How to Spot Fleas and Ticks

Fleas most commonly attach to your furry friend's tummy and head or at the base of their tail. If you don't see any fleas – remember, they are excellent jumpers and can move fast – try brushing your buddy with a flea comb. Get as close to the skin as you can and keep a bowl of soapy water close by in case you catch a few fleas and need to dispose of them. You can also try combing your pup over a sheet of white paper so that you can examine any “flea dirt” that falls off of your dog. If the brown dust turns red when moistened with water, you're facing a flea infestation.

Larger and less nimble, ticks are easier to find. Simply finger-comb your dog, searching for pea-sized bumps. You can also try using a flea comb, but be gentle if you hit any bumps or snags! It's very important that you don't damage the tick's body because it will be much harder to remove and can trigger the spread of disease or infection. Ticks like dark, moist places, so take extra care to check your pup's ears, groin area, “armpits,” and in between their toes.



Flea and Tick Treatment

If your veterinarian confirms a flea infestation, you'll need to act fast in treating your pup, all other furry family members, and your home. Your treatment plan could include:

- Oral medications
- Topical treatments (shampoos, sprays, powders)
- Deep cleaning your home (washing bedding, steam-cleaning carpets and upholstery)
- Home sprays or foggers
- Lawn treatments

To treat a tick bite, you should remove the tick (without any twisting or jerking motions!) and disinfect the bite