

Top 10 flea myths

Think you know about fleas and their impact on your pet? Read these common myths to test your knowledge.

1. Myth: A few fleas are no big deal.

Reality: You've heard the expression "breeding like rabbits"? Well, rabbits have nothing on fleas—a few fleas can turn into a massive infestation in a hurry. And if your pet is sensitive to flea antigen, even one or two bites can make him very uncomfortable. Your pet deserves to be completely free of fleas.

2. Myth: Pets need flea preventive only a few months out of the year.

Reality: In many warm, humid areas, fleas thrive year-round. Even in more seasonal climates, a warm spring or fall can extend the flea season to nine or 10 months of the year. Plus, fleas can survive on your pet and inside anywhere! Year-round flea control is best for your pet.

3. Myth: I've never seen a flea on my pet, so she doesn't need flea control.

Reality: You may be in flea denial. Just because you don't see fleas doesn't mean they aren't there. Your veterinarian can use a special comb to detect fleas and their waste, so ask her to do this if she hasn't already. Even if your pet's clean, she can pick up fleas at any time, so it's a good idea to protect her.

4. Myth: I can get good flea products at the pet store.

Reality: Over-the-counter flea control products are not as potent and therefore not as effective as the prescription products you can get from your veterinarian. Some are even toxic, especially if administered incorrectly. Your pet's doctor can prescribe the best product for your pet and his lifestyle (does he swim? hunt rodents?) and show you exactly how to apply it.

5. Myth: Once I treat my pet and the fleas go away, my work is done.

Reality: One of the biggest mistakes pet owners make is to stop giving a flea product after the fleas go away. One of the reasons you need to provide continuous control is this: Pets can become ultrasensitive to fleas if they're intermittently exposed. In other words, if you notice fleas, treat them, and three months later they come back, and then you treat them again and three months later they come back again, your pet is more likely to develop flea allergy dermatitis—a miserable condition that causes itchiness, lesions, and hair loss. Don't let the fleas come back at all, and your pet is at a much lower risk for flea allergy.

6. Myth: I only need to treat my one flea-ridden pet, not the other pets in my household.

Reality: All pets in your household need to be treated—especially the cats (fleas' favorite host), and even the guinea pig. Some pets are more sensitive to fleas than others, so if you treat only the pet that's scratching, she's likely to be reinfested by other pets that also have fleas but aren't giving you any itchy signals.

7. Myth: I can't afford to give a flea preventive monthly.

Reality: Can you afford to change the oil in your car to keep it running smoothly and help cut down on expensive repairs? Providing preventive health measures for your pet is the same approach. Compared to the stress and cost of treating flea-related illnesses—and possibly paying someone to decontaminate your home—monthly control is a low-cost alternative. If you can't afford to pay for a year's worth at a time, ask your veterinarian about setting up a realistic program, such as having a three-month supply mailed to you.

8. Myth: My pet stays in the backyard, so he won't pick up fleas.

Reality: Your yard is constantly being visited by wildlife such as raccoons and opossums, as well as other neighborhood pets (cats are notorious roamers). These animals can spread fleas and flea eggs, which can infest your pet when he goes outside.

9. Myth: All flea preventives protect pets from fleas only.

Reality: Flea products are often combined with agents that control other parasites as well, helping protect your pets from additional diseases—some of which can be transmitted to you. So keeping pets on flea control is best for the whole family.

10. Myth: Flea products are toxic.

Reality: Unlike "natural" products, prescription flea control agents have been extensively tested and approved by the FDA. Your veterinarian and the members of his hospital team use these products on their own pets, and they can answer any questions you have about safety.