



# Flea Allergies in Pets

Clermont Animal Hospital, Inc.

## General Information

Just as allergies plague many people, they also affect our pets. Some allergies like dust allergies, food allergies, and flea allergies are a problem throughout the year. Other allergies to things such as pollens and molds follow a seasonal pattern and are only present for only part of the year when certain plants are pollinating or for more extended times throughout the warm months. August is the height of “pet allergy season” as the allergic response has been building all through the summer and the heat of August adds to the discomfort and the itchiness of seasonal allergies and the flea population is high at this time. Below you will find information on flea allergies in your pet, the signs that indicate an allergic reaction, and some practical ways for minimizing the severity of your pet’s allergic condition. Information is also available on atopy (inhaled allergies), contact allergies, and food allergies. If treating the flea allergies helps, but not completely, ask for information on these other topics. Many pets suffer from multiple types of allergies at the same time.

## Causes

Flea allergies occur when your pet is hypersensitive to the saliva that a flea leaves behind when it bites your pet. Pets with flea allergies do not necessarily have a visible “flea problem” because it only takes one or two flea bites to set off an allergic reaction lasting for many days. In most cases, however, the fleas or signs of flea exposure (i.e. flea dirt) can be seen on your pet’s skin.

## Signs

Dogs and cats suffering from flea allergies can exhibit any combination of the following signs:

- Itchiness/Scratching/Biting at Skin, especially at the base of the tail
- Hair Loss, Particularly at the base of the tail in dogs and along the sides of cats
- Visible Fleas—a flea comb or other such fine-toothed comb can be used to search for and trap fleas at the base of your pet’s hair.
- “Flea Dirt”—Tiny black specks like pepper flakes in your pet’s hair and on the skin
- Irritability
- Arthritis Flare-up

## Diagnosis

Pets with flea allergies typically have a distinct pattern of itchiness, hair loss, and/or skin changes that can be identified on a physical examination. A definitive diagnosis can be made by treating your pet with prescription strength flea control for two consecutive months while also treating the environment for the same period of time. If signs disappear or significantly improve, a flea allergy is the underlying cause for your pet’s problem.

## Treatment

### Treating Your Pet

Flea allergies can be treated and the recurrence of signs prevented by applying one of the following prescription-strength flea products to your pet on a MONTHLY basis. Most over-the-counter products that are sold at pet stores and groceries are simply not strong enough to kill every single flea and prevent the allergic reaction. It is recommended that pets with flea allergies be kept on flea prevention year-round to prevent future break-outs and the need for aggressive treatment of the house and lawn beyond the first treatment sequence. In multi-pet households, it is ESSENTIAL to **treat every pet in the household**, not just the pet with the allergy problem. If

this is not done, fleas can live on the untreated animals and the flea problem can persist. See the lists below for suggested flea products for your pet(s).

#### **Dogs—Clermont Animal Hospital, Inc. Recommended Products**

- Vectra 3-D—This is the product that we recommend for most dogs.
  - Fastest flea kill time of all monthly products; only available product to kill and repel fleas, AND prevent egg and larva development.
  - (Kills fleas and ticks. Repels fleas, ticks, and mosquitoes. Prevents flea eggs and larvae from developing) **DOGS ONLY**
- Advantage Multi (Kills fleas and prevents heartworms and intestinal parasites)
  - This is the product we recommend if combination heartworm and flea control is desired, as long as tick infestation is NOT a concern (it has no effect against ticks)
  - Pets must be current on heartworm testing before this product can be prescribed.
- Capstar (Kills fleas starting within minutes; within 4-6 hours all fleas are dead)
  - Only effective for 24 hours
  - Best used in cases of known flea exposure (i.e. at the boarding kennel or after exposure to an infested site) to supplement other products
  - May be used in newly diagnosed animals to achieve the fastest possible kill
  - Capstar is safe to use in conjunction with any other flea product on the market.

#### **Dogs—Other Effective Flea Products**

- Advantix (Kills fleas and ticks. Repels fleas, ticks, and mosquitoes) **DOGS ONLY**
- Frontline Plus (Kills fleas and ticks. Prevents flea eggs and larvae from developing)
- Revolution (Kills fleas, ear mites and mange mites. Prevents heartworm infection)
- Promeris (Kills fleas and ticks)

#### **Cats—Clermont Animal Hospital, Inc. Recommended Products**

- Feline Advantage (Kills fleas)
- Frontline Plus (Kills fleas and ticks. Prevents flea eggs and larvae from developing)
- Feline Advantage Multi (Kills fleas and prevents heartworms and intestinal parasites)
- Capstar (Kills fleas starting within minutes; within 4-6 hours all fleas are dead)
  - Only effective for 24 hours
  - Best used in cases of known flea exposure (i.e. at the boarding kennel or after exposure to an infested site) to supplement other products
  - May be used in newly diagnosed animals to achieve the fastest possible kill
  - Capstar is safe to use in conjunction with any other flea product on the market.

#### **Other Animals—Clermont Animal Hospital, Inc. Recommended Products**

If you have other animals in the household besides dogs and cats, please talk to our doctors about which products to use on these pets. While there are no products specifically labeled for use in animals other than cats and dogs, many of the cat products are safe and effective in a variety of other species. However, each species is different, and some products can be dangerous, even deadly for some animals. Always check with the veterinarian before using a product unless it is specifically labeled for that animal.

#### **Treating Your House**

Fleas only spend 5-15% of the time on the animal. The rest of the time they are in the environment. The egg, larvae, and pupae stages make up about 95% of the flea life cycle and are always present in the environment. In the closed environment of the house with limited food options, the repellent properties of flea products (Vectra 3-D, Advantix) are not always effective for hungry fleas. For this reason, it is essential to treat the house in order to get flea allergies under control. Area sprays such as Knock Out® (available at Clermont Animal Hospital, Inc.) are more effective than foggers because they can be sprayed under furniture, behind furniture, and in the corners of the rooms where the foggers won't reach. Knock Out® kills adult fleas, flea eggs

and flea larvae. Repeat use in six weeks to kill fleas that emerge from the pupae stage. Areas should always be well-ventilated and all pets and people should be out of the treated area until the area has had time to dry completely (at least several hours). **Before treatment**, the areas should be well **vacuumed** and the **vacuum bag discarded**. When treating, be sure to spray the product uniformly to lightly cover the entire area without saturating. Lift or tilt furniture to spray underneath and behind, remove couch cushions and spray underneath, spray beneath tables, chairs, etc. Start at one end of the room and work backward toward the exit. Once a room has been sprayed, do not re-enter it until the area is completely dry. Pet owners who do not wish to treat the house themselves should contact an exterminator to arrange for service.

In addition to chemically treating the house, it is a good idea to wash all of the pet bedding, blankets, stuffed toys, and household bedding in the hottest temperature water recommended, using bleach whenever possible. This eliminates flea eggs and larvae from these hard-to-treat areas. This entire process of spraying and thorough cleaning should be repeated again six weeks later. This ensures that fleas in the pupae stage at the time of initial treatment are killed once they emerge (virtually nothing will kill fleas in the pupae stage). The pupae stage can last up to six weeks dictating the necessity for this six-week treatment interval. After two house treatments six weeks apart, there should not be a need for further house treatment as long as prescription flea prevention is used year-round and your pet does not suffer from another episode of flea allergies. Avoid the need for future house treatments by continual use of prescription strength flea prevention year-round.

### **Treating the Yard**

For many pets, the yard is the place where flea infestations begin. In cases of severe flea allergies or when choosing pet flea treatments that don't have flea repelling properties, it is important to treat the yard as well as the house. A variety of products are available for yard treatment. Some are spray bottles that attach to a garden hose for fast and easy distribution, while others are dusts or granules that can be sprinkled on the surface of the lawn. Lawn treatment companies and exterminator services can often provide professional yard treatment if that is desired. Regardless of the treatment option chosen, it is important to closely follow product recommendations regarding safety for both pets and people following treatment. Never allow your pet to eat the grass or other vegetation on a treated lawn. Just as with the house treatment, it is important to retreat according to product recommendations (usually every week to ten days, especially after a rain unless using time-release granules) to ensure that all fleas in the pupae stage at the time of initial treatment are killed.

In some cases, a series of lawn treatments covering a six-week interval is enough to stop the flea infestation. In other cases, repeated treatments through the warmer months may be necessary at regular intervals. This is especially true if adjacent neighbors have pets and are more lax on flea control or if the yard is shared by wildlife species such as raccoons, opossums, or deer. The degree of flea sensitivity of your pet may also dictate the frequency and extent of yard treatment required for complete flea allergy control.

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