



The most commonly found fleas in houses in this country are the cat flea (*Ctenocephalides felis*) and dog flea (*Ctenocephalides canis*). The human flea (*Pulex irritans*) is now extremely rare. These fleas are brown in colour, about 2mm long and 1mm high and so thin from side to side as to be almost flat. The adult feeds on blood from birds or mammals while the larvae feed on small particles of organic matter.

Fleas are extremely well adapted for their way of life. Their “armour” makes them hard to kill and their tall, thin body allows them to move around very rapidly among hairs or feathers. A flea is capable of jumping a vertical height of 30cm which represents about 200 times its own body length. This is comparable to a man being able to jump about 350m.

Life Cycle

Fleas pass through three stages (egg, larvae, pupa) before emerging as an adult. The eggs are smooth, oval and greyish white and very small ($\frac{1}{4}$ mm). They can just be seen with the naked eye. Unlike louse eggs, they are not attached to hairs and they easily fall off the host animal to continue their life cycle in cracks and crevices on the floor or in the lair or nest of the host. In warm conditions, the egg hatches in about 7 to 10 days into the larvae – a small white thread-like creature with bands and bristles around its body enabling it to move around. The larvae is fully grown (5mm in length) after about 40 days. It then pupates in a cocoon spun from a salivary secretion. The cocoons are normally covered with dust and therefore difficult to see. The adult eventually emerges after a further 14-21 days. They can lie dormant in their cocoons for months or even years until the vibrations of a likely host stimulate their emergence. If an infested house has stood empty for a long time, the hungry fleas will start to emerge as soon as the new occupants move in,

Habits

Each individual flea species is more or less dependant upon its own host species, but in many cases it can also suck the blood of other species. Of the 50-60 different species of flea found in Europe, about half occasionally bite humans, but only one species – the human flea – is able to breed on a diet of human blood only.

A cat or a dog may have a light infestation of fleas without you noticing, but if domestic animals are carrying large numbers of fleas, then there is a greater likelihood that humans will be bitten. A big problem may occur if the cat or dog is removed from the house as the fleas left behind then have no choice but to move to humans to feed. Cat and dog fleas cannot breed without their principal host, and so the infestation will eventually die out on its own. However, they can live for months on a diet of human blood alone.



As cats and dogs are the main cause of flea problems, ensure they are regularly treated

Home

Both adults and larvae live on the host animals as well as in cracks and crevices, usually on the floor, and in the host animal’s bedding.

Treatment of pets

In dealing with an infestation of cat or dog fleas, it is necessary to have the host animal treated with a suitable insecticide (veterinary advice should be sought on this matter). The animal's bedding should also be washed and treated with an insecticide.

Treatment of home

All floors, floor coverings and skirtings should be treated with a suitable insecticide. Particular attention should be paid to cracks and crevices. Either an aerosol spray or dusting powder can be used. Upholstered furnishings and mattresses if infested can be similarly treated, whilst bed linen should be washed. Thorough cleaning of floors and floor coverings with a vacuum cleaner is also recommended. Spray the inside of new vacuum cleaner dust bags with insecticide after each use to kill any fleas collected.

Be sure to use only chemicals which state they are suitable for flea infestations. Always read the label and carefully obey any safety precautions during use. Suitable products can be purchased from most chemists, hardware stores and vets.

For larger infestations, it is recommended that professional treatment is sought.

Harrow Council can provide an affordable, chargeable service for the treatment of fleas in domestic (including rented) and commercial properties. Please contact us for further advice

Advice on the identification and control of all household pests is provided free of charge and is available by phone, email or via our website.

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