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Win the Flea Control Battle

There are three goals to understanding the flea control battle. They are: (1) relieve the pet's discomfort by killing fleas on the pet, (2) Eliminating the infestation on the premise, and (3) prevent future flea infestations.

Goal number one, get rid of existing fleas on the pet. Adult fleas are biting and feeding on your pet. To achieve this goal, proper administration of the flea product is essential for the rapid and prolonged residual ability to kill fleas. The entire dose needs to be applied directly to the skin, and not on the hair. It is best to part the hair, and apply the product directly on the skin. The flea control product will kill all the fleas on the pet. It may take four hours, or even as long as 36 hours before all existing fleas are dead.

Goal number two eliminate fleas on the premises. Somewhere in your pet's environment, in the house, or shaded areas of the yard, immature forms of the flea such as flea eggs, larvae, and pupae are continuing to grow into mature fleas that will re-infest your pet. Many flea control products not only kill the fleas on a dog or cat, but also provide prolonged residual activity, often, killing fleas as they mature for up to one month. In addition, some products provide prolonged activity against flea reproduction by killing the eggs, preventing eggs from developing or preventing eggs from being laid. It often takes several weeks to eliminate a flea infestation. All flea infestations in dogs and cats originate from a flea-infested premise, and it takes time to eradicate the immature stages living in the carpet or outdoors.

The home or yard can become infested when fleas lay eggs that hatch into larvae. These larvae spin cocoons in which they develop into pupae and later emerge as adult fleas. This cycle may take two to three weeks or as long as several months. Also, fleas will infest cats, opossums, raccoons, and other wild animals that may come into your yard. This is why all pets should be treated year round. Every pet in the household must be treated, because as newly emerging fleas jump onto that pet, the flea will feed and mate. Female fleas begin to lay eggs within 24 hours of mating. Since each female flea produces 40 to 50 eggs in a day, within a few days, hundreds and potentially thousands of eggs will be deposited in the house and yard. If a single monthly dose of flea treatment is missed on a single pet, flea control is likely to fail, because the flea eggs dropping off the untreated pet continue to develop and emerge in the environment. So we cannot treat only the scratching dog; we must also treat the cat that may falsely appear to be flea-free.

Flea eggs are laid in the animal's hair and then fall off and drop into carpets and outdoors, this is the flea-infested pet that distributes the eggs. Think of the flea as a living saltshaker. These white flea eggs are deposited in every place that the pet has access to. The largest number of eggs are deposited in places where the pet spends most of

their time. This includes areas in and around the home, such as on the bed, next to the couch, on throw rugs, or pet bedding; and outdoors under porches, bushes and in crawl spaces.

Not only is a flea-infested pet a flea egg distributor, but wildlife such as opossums, raccoons, foxes, and coyotes also carry fleas. And don't forget stray dogs and cats that run through your back yard and neighborhood. As these animals move through the neighborhood, flea eggs drop off. This distribution is particularly heavy in shaded, protected habitats where eggs and larvae are likely to survive and develop into adult fleas, such as under bushes, shrubs, porches, and in crawlspaces. Within a few days, these flea eggs will develop into larvae. In a week or two, these larvae spin a cocoon and develop into pupae. In a few more weeks, the pupae develop into fleas that emerge from the cocoons and jump onto pets and occasionally people.

Dogs and cats rarely acquire fleas because fleas jumped off another dog or cat. Fleas that are biting pets and people in the home came from pupa, which came from larvae, which came from eggs laid by female fleas about three to eight weeks earlier. By the time the pet owner first notices fleas on their pet, immature stages have already been growing in the home or outdoors for about one or two months. So, if a pet owner sees fleas on their dog or cat, then flea eggs, larvae, pupae and emerging fleas are in their carpet or outdoors in shaded areas. Immature stages of fleas are developing in their homes or shaded areas of the yard. These fleas will be emerging and continuously re-infesting their pet.

Once a month flea products have been correctly administered to all dogs and cats in a household every month, it essentially means that no fleas will be reproduced and no eggs will be dropping into the environment. Therefore, within two to five days, eggs that were previously deposited have developed into larvae, and within one or two weeks, larvae have developed into pupae, and two to six weeks later those pupae have become adult fleas. As those fleas emerge and jump onto treated pets, the monthly-applied flea products kill them. Thus within three to eight weeks, or occasionally longer, all the fleas will be gone. If fleas cannot reproduce, they will go extinct in the home and yard. But if a pet owner misses treating one pet, or skips a monthly treatment, or administers the product incorrectly, fleas will survive and lay eggs and the infestation will continue.

Even if every flea-infested pet in the house is treated correctly, the premises in the home or shaded protected areas in the yard will still be infested for several weeks with immature flea life stages and emerging fleas. These fleas continue to develop and jump onto treated pets. Existing flea products do not repel fleas effectively and do not kill fleas instantly. It often takes several hours, maybe even a day or two, after these fleas have jumped onto treated pets for the fleas to be killed by the residual insecticide. As a result, pet owners should expect to see some fleas on their pets for at least three to eight weeks, and occasionally even longer after treatment has started.

Do I need to treat the premises? Field studies show that Fipronil (Frontline), imidacloprid (Advantage), and selamectin (Revolution) were 95 to 100% effective in eliminating established flea population without treating the premises. Even though fleas continue to emerge, the products dramatically reduced the flea numbers on pets. After three monthly applications of Advantage or Frontline, flea burdens were reduced by 99% and 97% respectively. Such studies indicated that while the products were highly effective, fleas were still present in low numbers on many treated pets for several weeks after the product was applied.

In a typical scenario, a pet is treated appropriately and flea numbers initially decrease, but then rebound three to four weeks after initial treatment when eggs that were laid over a month previously, (before any flea control was administered) finally develop into adult fleas. As good as Frontline, Advantage, and Revolution are, direct environmental control may still be needed with severe flea infestations because owners may not want to wait three to eight weeks until the problem is resolved. Measures to reduce premises infestation include washing pet bedding, vacuuming, carpets, washing area rugs, using flea light traps and applying insecticide such as Ectokyl to the indoor and outdoor areas.

Goal number three, prevent new infestations with lifelong flea control. Now that the infestation is eradicated, pet owners should continue to treat their pets. Wild animals and feral dogs and cats still run the neighborhood and yards carrying fleas and flea eggs. These flea-infested animals are continuously depositing flea eggs in the outdoor environment, which can start the problem all over again. So keep pets on flea control either seasonally (Spring through Fall), or year around. The when fleas that have developed from eggs deposited from feral dogs or cats or wildlife jump onto your treated pet, the fleas will either be killed or their eggs destroyed. Thus, preventing future flea infestations.