

# INTEGRATED PEST MANAGEMENT: FLEAS



Fleas are tiny, wingless insects that are famous for their jumping ability. The most common flea in California is the cat flea. Cat fleas can live on cats or dogs. Many animals, both wild and tame, can have fleas, but most fleas in homes are cat fleas brought in by cats and dogs.

## How do I know if there are fleas in my home?

You might notice flea bites before you see the fleas themselves. Fleas bite their hosts and suck blood for food. Flea bites usually cluster around people's ankles. The bites look like small red spots surrounded by pinkish halos. You may see fleas crawling through your pet's fur or notice dark brownish-red particles on your pet or in the area where your pet sleeps. You may even see fleas hopping around your house.

## When are fleas a problem?

Some people and pets have allergic reactions to flea bites and experience intense itching for days. Fleas can spread tapeworms if a pet swallows fleas when they lick their fur. Children can also get tapeworms by swallowing flea eggs, but this is not common. Cat fleas can also spread a flu-like illness to people.

## Flea life cycle

Fleas have four life stages. Before laying eggs, female fleas gorge themselves on blood. The tiny eggs can land in carpeting, upholstered furniture, and bedding, hatching into tiny wormlike larvae. Within a week or two they transform into pupae protected by a silk cocoon. Fleas emerge at different times to look for a blood meal when they sense movement or body heat. At any given time, most fleas are in the egg and larval stage.

## IPM Strategies

### 1 DON'T SPRAY! VACUUM INSTEAD

Spraying pesticides or using bug bombs may kill a few fleas, but they won't touch the fleas on your pet, the eggs or many of the larvae in carpeting or on furniture, and especially the cocoons. Don't sprinkle flea powder on carpeting where children play.

Vacuum carpeting and furniture frequently and thoroughly, even if you only see a few fleas. A vacuum cleaner is your best weapon if you think you have fleas in your home. Use a high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) or HEPA-equivalent vacuum cleaner.

Use the vacuum's crevice tool on furniture every few days and go back and forth over carpeting. As you suck the fleas up, they'll die in the vacuum cleaner bag from being knocked around, so don't worry that they'll jump out of the bag. If you're using a bagless vacuum, carefully empty the cup outdoors into a plastic bag, seal the bag, and throw into an outdoor garbage bin.

### 2 CHECK YOUR PET

If you have a pet, do the following:

- ▶ Use a metal flea comb daily on cats or dogs.
- ▶ Use washable pet bedding that you can launder frequently.
- ▶ Check for fleas when you bathe your dog. Use a mild soap, never soap with added insecticide. The fleas will fall off your wet, soapy dog and drown in the water.
- ▶ Do not use sprays, powders, or flea collars on your pets.

### 3 MONITOR FOR FLEAS

Try the following to find out if you have fleas:

**White socks.** Walk through your home wearing white socks. The fleas are attracted to warmth and movement and will jump on to the socks.

**Flea traps.** You can purchase these at home improvement centers or pet stores. They plug into an outlet and have a light bulb above sticky paper. Since fleas are attracted to heat (from the bulb) and light, they jump right onto the sticky paper. You can also find online directions for making your own inexpensive traps out of pie tins filled with soapy water.

[IPM Strategies continued]

You either float a tea light in the center or plug in a desk lamp and face the light bulb over the water. The fleas hop toward the light source and drown in the soapy water. Keep traps out of children's reach.

**Flea combs for pets.** These combs are available at pet stores and have closely spaced teeth. Fleas get stuck as you comb through your pet's fur. Fill a small container with water and add a few drops of dish soap. Comb your pet and when you see fleas getting caught, plunge the comb in the water. The fleas will drown and sink to the bottom.

## ACTION PLAN FOR FLEAS

WHEN TO TAKE ACTION	NONPESTICIDE PRACTICES	LAST RESORT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ When you see fleas. They could be crawling in your pet's fur or hopping on carpeting or around pet bedding.</li> <li>▶ When you notice particles of dried blood on your pet's skin or around pet bedding.</li> <li>▶ When you see fleas hopping around in a sandbox.</li> <li>▶ If you or children in your program have flea bites.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Use a HEPA or HEPA equivalent vacuum cleaner on floors, carpeting, and furniture daily.</li> <li>▶ Wash pet bedding often.</li> <li>▶ Use a metal flea comb on your pet daily.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Use flea traps to check for fleas.</li> <li>▶ Get a tight-fitting cover for the sandbox. Replace infested sand with new sand.</li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Talk to your veterinarian about the safe use of liquid pesticide spot-on treatments for your pet. Always follow label instructions.</li> <li>▶ Hire a pest management professional and request that he or she use insect growth regulators but not pyrethroid insecticides.</li> </ul>

## LESS COMMON SITUATIONS

Fleas that live on squirrels and other rodents can transmit plague to people. See *IPM Handout for Family Child Care Homes on Integrated Pest Management: Ground Squirrels* and *Integrated Pest Management: Rats and Mice* for information on managing these pests that can carry plague-carrying fleas. Keep other wild animals such as feral cats, possums, skunks, and raccoons away from your house. Patch vents or openings with ¼-inch hardware cloth.

## RESOURCES

• University of California Statewide IPM Program: *Fleas*  
[www.ipm.ucdavis.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/pn7419.html](http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/pn7419.html)

• Center for Disease Control and Prevention, Healthy Housing Reference Manual, Chapter 4: Disease Vectors and Pests  
[www.cdc.gov/nceh/publications/books/housing/cha04.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/publications/books/housing/cha04.htm)

California Childcare Health Program, University of California, San Francisco School of Nursing • [cchp.ucsf.edu](http://cchp.ucsf.edu)



Funding for the Integrated Pest Management Toolkit for Family Child Care Homes has been provided in full or in part through a grant awarded by the California Department of Pesticide Regulation (DPR). The contents of this document do not necessarily reflect the views and policies of DPR nor does mention of trade names or commercial products constitute endorsement or recommendation for use.