

# TIMELY INFORMATION

## Agriculture & Natural Resources



**Alert: Do not let fleas get high in summer**

**Xing Ping Hu**

**Urban Entomology Specialist**

**June 29, 2010**



Figure 1. Cat flea (courtesy of Jack)

**What fleas we are dealing with?** Every year in Alabama, flea problems increase along with summer temperatures. The cat flea, *Ctenocephalides felis* (Figure 1), is the most common flea found on cats and dogs in Alabama.

**What are the effects of flea infestation?** Flea bites are extremely irritating to humans and pets, causing intense itching and even weight loss. In addition, fleas are well known to transmit dog tapeworm to both pets and humans.

**What are fleas' preferred hosts?** In order for fleas to reproduce they must feed on the blood of warm-blood animals including, but not limited to cats, dogs, rats, squirrels, raccoons, foxes, skunks.

**Are humans a flea host?** Fleas do bite humans, but they do not develop very well on human blood. If no preferred host is present, a flea population will soon die out. Therefore, the best way prevent a flea infestation is to: **keep indoor pets indoors, and outdoor pets outdoors, at least during the summer.**

**Why do I still have an indoor flea problem even though I've kept my pet outdoors for over a month?** Although the adult indoor fleas may have died out, the existing eggs, larvae, and pupa will continue to develop into new adult fleas. At 75 percent relative humidity and 70 degree F, it takes 26-140 days for a flea population to go from egg to adult. An adult flea may lay over 420 eggs in its lifetime!

**Where do we find flea concentrations?** Fleas do not spend their entire life on their animal host. They are nearly always associated with animals that regularly return to the same resting sites. Fleas will not stray far from preferred host resting areas, because they must stay on or close to a host to survive.

**Do Flea larvae bite?** Flea larvae do not bite. Instead they live in the ground or in hiding spots and feed on adult flea feces and other organic matter. They are found in shaded and protected areas frequented by host animals. Larvae do not survive well in areas with strong sunlight or where there is heavy foot traffic.

If you have an indoor flea infestation, the larvae are usually hidden deep in carpet fibers, under furniture cushions and in other protected spots.

### **What should I do if I have indoor flea infestation?**

#### **Treat your pets:**

1. Bath pets in a mild detergent or shampoo to kill eggs/fleas on pets.
2. Use a spot-on treatment, which can be purchased in pet stores or from vets, or a systemic oral administered treatment (available from vets only).
3. Prevent pets from accessing carpeted areas and confine pets to one resting area.

#### **Home treatment:**

1. Vacuum upholstered furniture. Remove and vacuum under cushions and in cracks and crevices of furniture.
2. Steam-clean and vacuum carpets, especially beneath furniture and in areas frequented by pets. Use a hand sprayer to treat all carpets with an insect growth regulator insecticide. Allow carpet to dry and vacuum a second time.
3. Continue to vacuum for 10 days to 2 weeks daily or every another day to kill adult fleas that continue to emerge from cocoons.
4. Immediately destroy vacuum bag by burning it or seal it in a plastic bag and dispose of it in an outdoor garbage can.
5. Wash throw rugs and the pet's bedding.
6. Apply an IGR insecticide if quick control is necessary (for examples: Precor, Martin's, Deminze Nylar, Flea Stopper, or Ultracide aerosils). Program™, a once-a-month oral treatment, effectively sterilizes flea female by preventing eggs from hatching. IGR breaks the flea life cycle.

#### **Outside the Home**

1. Mow grass low; trim shrubs near animal resting sites to expose flea eggs and larvae to sunlight
2. Open areas to sunlight by removing low hanging vegetation and debris in heavily infested areas, especially where pets rest.
3. Seal crawl spaces to keep animals from making a nest or den under the house.
4. Never leave pet food outdoors overnight.
5. Outdoor sprays are only recommended when flea populations are extremely high. The best products for elimination of fleas outdoors are formulations that contain a knockdown material such as pyrethrin or permethrin plus an insect growth regulator (for example, pyriproxyfen or methoprene) to inhibit larval maturation. Avoid products containing diazinon or chlorpyrifos as these materials can pollute waterways.