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As flea season looms, consider taking action

WELL, spring in the Tri-Valley has sprung - or perhaps I should say: has sprung a leak! And while the cool, wet weather this time of year may be an unwelcome extension of winter, it does benefit our pets in one way: cool weather delays the onset of flea season. As we wait for things to dry out and warm up, this is the time to get a head start on those pesky pests.

This week I want to discuss the basics of flea and tick control. These are the most common external parasites for dogs and cats. Although there are lice and mites that can cause skin diseases in dogs and cats, fleas and ticks take the cake, or in this case, the cat and the dog when it comes to the sheer number of pets affected.

A single flea can bite a pet over 400 times in one day, and can transmit tapeworms to dogs and cats. They can also cause allergic skin reactions that result in compulsive scratching by pets and lead to severe skin infections. Ticks can transmit several diseases to pets, including Lyme disease which is also transmissible to humans.

To free your pet from fleas, the most important thing to know is how rapidly fleas multiply. A female flea lays between three and 50 eggs a day, and has a breeding life of about 100 days.

That means a female flea might lay as few as 300 eggs or as many as 5,000 eggs in her life.

And in warm weather, those eggs can develop into adult egg-layers in a single month. Studies show that this is the reason a flea infestation in a house or yard can be difficult to eradicate, because all it takes is a few fleas to perpetuate an overwhelming flea problem.

In fact, the adult fleas that bite dogs and cats constitute only about 1 percent of the problem. The adult fleas are outnumbered 100 to 1 by the eggs they have laid and the flea larvae that hatch from those eggs.

Not to fear, though. There are several safe and effective flea control measures you can institute.

First there is a medication for cats and dogs called Program that will prevent fleas from reproducing. Once a flea bites a dog or cat taking this medication, the insects ability to reproduce is destroyed.

Veterinarians describe this as birth control for fleas. This medication can be given to cats as an injection once every 6 months, and can be given to dogs as a monthly chewable tablet.

For dogs, Program is also included in a monthly parasite preventative chewable tablet called Sentinel, which prevents heartworms and intestinal worms in addition to sterilizing any fleas that bite.

So that goes a long way towards eliminating a flea infestation right there. But what about the fleas that a pet already has?

They may be sterilized and unable to reproduce, but that wont make Fluffy feel any better today. In addition to preventing those fleas from laying viable eggs, another medication is needed to kill the fleas after they have been sterilized.

This medication is called Capstar. It is a tablet that can be given to dogs and cats that kills fleas starting within 30 minutes. While this medication kills the fleas quickly, it does nothing to prevent fleas that may be taking a brief vacation from your pet from hopping back on tomorrow and biting. Therefore, this medication is usually given several days in a row, or as often as a pet is discovered to have picked up a few new fleas.

The key thing to understand is that the above approach kills the adult fleas, and any fleas that get a bite in and lay a few eggs before dying will not leave behind a next generation of fleas. Tackling the problem at both of these levels is fundamental in eradicating a flea infestation.

In addition, there is a topically applied medication called Frontline Plus that contains two different medications to help eliminate fleas; one that kills adult fleas as they wander through a pet's fur, and one that prevents any eggs from hatching that are laid before the flea dies.

Frontline Plus is supplied in small plastic tubes the size of a house key, that a pet owner squirts onto a single place on the back of a pet's neck.

From there it spreads over the skin and is stored in the many thousands of microscopic grease glands, making it resistant to being washed off by a bath. For cats, one treatment lasts a month and for dogs it lasts up to 3 months. Again, this singular approach tackles the problem at both levels.

Either approach is very effective and, in uncommon cases where the flea problem is really overwhelming, all of the above can be done concurrently.

Ticks are capable of spreading several diseases to pets and people and, as opposed to fleas that are worse in warmer weather, are more of a year-round pet threat.

The only treatment mentioned above that also kills ticks is Frontline Plus. For tick control, this is applied once a month. Another product called the Preventic Collar can be used on dogs to kill ticks, although oddly this will not kill fleas.

Being proactive about preventing flea and tick problems is easy to do and can prevent more serious problems later.

Check with your veterinarian to decide which approach is best for your pets, so when they venture forth this spring, the only unwelcome addition they bring back to your home is mud.

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