

PARASITES

Flea and worm control – a holistic approach

By Liza Schneider*

FLEAS AND WORMS can be extremely harmful parasites.

Not only do they cause a tremendous amount of irritation to their hosts but they are also responsible for health problems.

Fleas can cause flea allergy dermatitis and transmit other parasites such as tapeworms and *Haemobartonella*. (Outside of New Zealand, fleas transmit a number of other parasites.)

Worms may cause abdominal discomfort, vomiting and diarrhoea. They can infest young animals so severely that they can cause them to be anaemic and debilitated.

Fleas and worms have evolved with their hosts for thousands and thousands of years and, as with all parasites, it is virtually impossible to completely eradicate them.

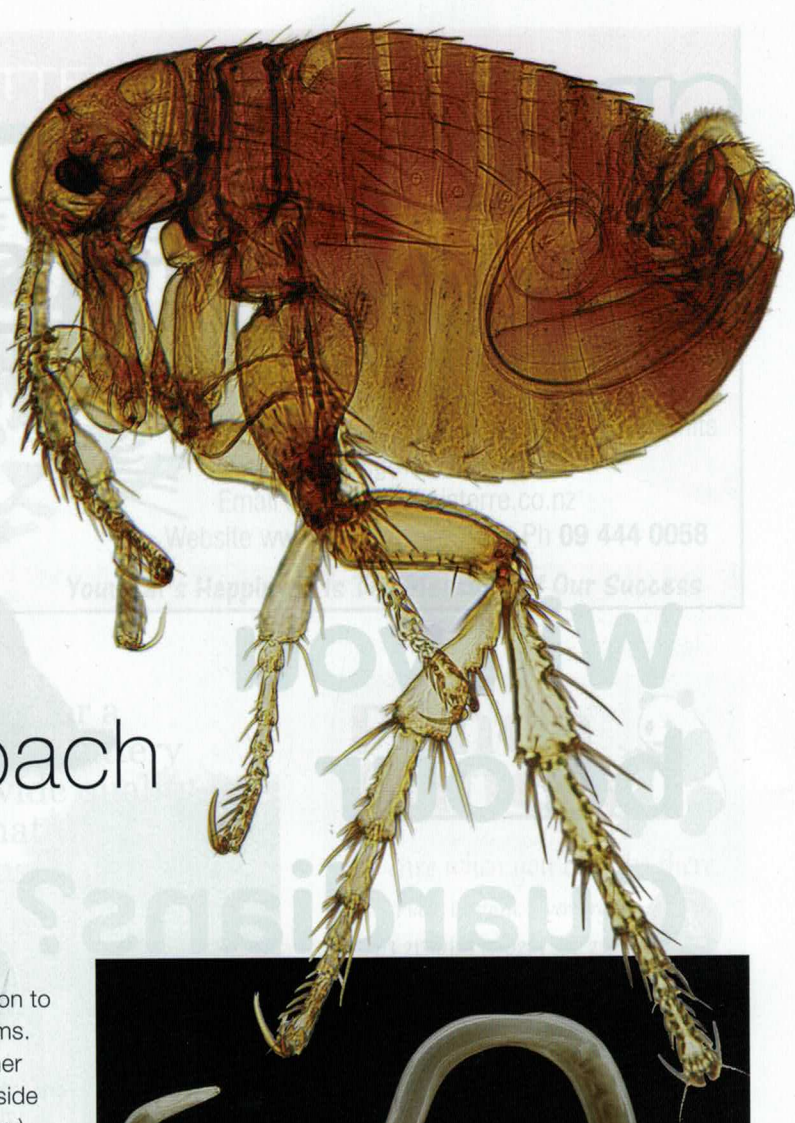
In any given population of animals, however, some individuals will have a greater parasite burden than others, indicating that some animals have qualities that make them less hospitable to these parasites. Some of these tendencies are genetic but an excessive flea or worm burden is often an indication that an animal has a weakened immune system.

Fleas may be present in the environment and, as mentioned above, they can transmit tapeworm while other worms come from cysts in raw meat, the environment, or are passed from a mother dog to her pups.

As is the case in wild animal populations, a healthy animal in a healthy and suitable environment (some breeds are not suited to the hot and humid climates in which they live and fleas easily proliferate) is less likely to have an excessive parasite burden.



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From a holistic point of view we question why fleas or worms are present in high numbers in a specific individual and endeavour to re-establish balance so that natural harmony is restored and there isn't an overpopulation of fleas or worms.

There are a number of ways to reduce parasite numbers.

Firstly, supporting your pet's immune system with good nutrition will go a long way to making them less tasty to fleas and better able to defend against worm burdens. Vitamin B and garlic, in particular, are wonderful aids and can help to deter fleas. But be cautious with garlic as, given in excess, it can be toxic to dogs and cats.

Various herbs including neem, essential oils and a citrus wash can be used externally as flea repellents, and various homeopathic and herbal wormers are available to help combat worms. With the use of the latter, as well as with the use of essential oils, it is important that they are used under the guidance of a qualified practitioner as some can also be toxic.

Regular flea combing will help with the monitoring

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and reduction of flea numbers, especially when used in conjunction with diatomaceous earth (DE), a handy non-chemical aid in flea control. DE is a fine white powder made of fossilised algae deposits. It desiccates fleas and other insects when they are exposed to it.

Given its microscopically sharp edges, when DE is taken internally at the recommended dose it has some effect damaging worms and in some cases has helped to reduce worm burdens.

It is generally safe and non-toxic when taken as a supplement, but a food-grade product should be used. Caution must be exercised when using it externally as the dust may cause damage to eyes and the respiratory tract if inhaled.

Striving to minimise the use of chemical products with a more natural approach can be advantageous from a holistic perspective when effective, but there are times when these relatively more gentle methods are not enough to deter fleas and worms.

In such cases the animal may benefit from other supportive therapies or the assistance of stronger commercial products.

It is important to consider all available resources to support health and well-being, but not all products are created equally and discretion is important.

Some commercial products have toxic side-effects and must be used with caution. It is also important to be mindful how you dispose of these products as some of them are eco-toxic and cause damage to our environment.

These days, veterinary clinics stock a variety of products which are generally safer and more reliable than some more widely available products.

Many veterinary products have combined activity, targeting both fleas and worms. "Spot on" products may be helpful but the efficacy of some may be compromised by regular swimming and some individuals don't tolerate them.

The relatively new tablet formulations can be useful in these situations. Collars may be helpful, too.

It may be difficult to determine the best solution for your pet, but vets and vet nurses are specially trained to help guide you to the right solution.

Typically the number of fleas on any dog or cat is only the tip of the iceberg, reflecting a much greater flea population in the animal's environment of both adult and immature fleas.

Therefore, addressing the environment is a very important component of flea control.

Cedar, eucalyptus or pennyroyal oils on dogs' bedding may be used to deter fleas but are toxic if ingested. Immature fleas can be destroyed by regularly hanging pet bedding out in the sunshine, thoroughly vacuuming carpets on a regular

basis and sprinkling them with borax or DE afterward.

Although fleas may bite humans and be irritating, worms can be far more dangerous as some can be transmitted from pets to humans. With this in mind, it is very important to ensure that you have good hygiene practices and that ideally your pet is worm free.

A good way to check is with a poop sample analysis called a faecal egg count. Under a microscope we can identify worm eggs which gives an indication of what types of worms are present and how severe the burden is. This is a very useful test to help check whether natural dewormers are working and, with the increase in worms that are resistant to some drugs, it can be a very helpful monitoring tool.

By using a holistic approach to manage both animals and their environment, and by respecting natural principles, animals can be kept healthy and free of parasites. 🐾

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