

Fleas in the home

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The past few years have seen a tremendous increase in the number of reported flea infestations in domestic properties throughout the UK. The council offers a chargeable service to get rid of them, but the following provides some advice.

What are fleas?

World wide there are over 1000 species of fleas, each being parasitic upon a particular species of warm blooded animal (since blood is the only food of the adult flea).

The human flea is now quite rare in the UK. Surveys in Greater Manchester have shown that over 90% of infestations in houses are cat fleas, the majority of the remainder being bird fleas. A lot of the fleas on dogs are also cat fleas.

The visual difference between the various types of fleas is so slight that a microscope or powerful hand lens is required to spot them. Colour or size is no guide, a well-fed flea being much darker and larger than a half-starved one.

The flea can be found in various stages of development. After 3-10 days the eggs hatch into minute, white larvae (maggots) which feed on dust and the droppings of adult fleas. After 3-12 weeks the maggots spin a small cocoon (pupae) and develop into the adult stage. The adult flea will remain inside the cocoon until it is stimulated to emerge by vibration. This explains why hordes of fleas may attack people entering houses that have been empty for a long time. No one is quite sure how long an adult flea lives but it is probably about 2 years.

Where can they be found?

One of the reasons fleas have become more widespread is because we are making life much easier for them. Being semi-tropical insects, fleas can die of cold, but the spread of central heating has made conditions in our homes much more acceptable to them. The larvae and pupae develop much faster in hot and humid weather.

Contrary to popular belief, cat fleas do not live on their hosts. A cat will carry an average of only 25 fleas at a time. The fleas simply jump onto a cat for their daily meal and then off again. Fleas spend most of their time in the places where a cat sleeps. These places can have many thousands of fleas in various stages of development. Female fleas lay their eggs indiscriminately in carpets or other materials, and can produce 800-1000 eggs in their lifetime.

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Fortunately, cat fleas do not particularly care for human blood, but if the cat is prevented from entering a room where the fleas are then the fleas become very hungry and will feed upon humans. The same is true of bird fleas, which will feed on birds while they nest in roof spaces, but may move to other parts of the house after nesting is complete, again biting people to feed.

Are fleas harmful?

Although fleas are known to carry disease, in the UK they are not generally responsible for the spread of infection. However, they can inflict unpleasant bites, and about half of people bitten by fleas will have an allergic reaction to the insect's saliva. Flea bites appear as tiny, dark red spots surrounded by a reddened area. They can be intensely irritating and persist for 1-2 days.

How to get rid of fleas

Regular cleaning denies fleas their breeding sites. Removing debris from cracks and crevices, and around the edges of carpets, using the suction pipe of a vacuum cleaner, will remove most of the household flea population. After thoroughly cleaning a room you can use an insecticide on floors and carpets.

There are also specialist insecticidal powders or aerosols that you can get for your pets. These can be obtained from a vet or pet shop, and used on pets and their sleeping areas. Make sure you follow the directions on the container.

Contacting us

If you would like more information about pest control you can contact us by:

Writing to:

Pest Control, Chadderton Town Hall, Middleton Road, Chadderton, Oldham, OL9 6PP

Phoning:

0161 770 2244

Faxing:

0161 770 4500

Emailing:

pestcontrol@oldham.gov.uk

Further information

For more information about pests and pest control please see our other detailed fact sheets listed below:

- [Pest control](#)
- [Australian spider beetles](#)

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- [Bed bugs](#)
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- [Brown rats](#)
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Civic Centre, West Street, Oldham OL1 1QJ

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