

Safe Use of Flea & Tick Products in Pets

Fleabites may be more than an itchy annoyance to some dogs and cats. They can cause flea allergy dermatitis—an allergic reaction to proteins in flea saliva. And a pet’s constant scratching can cause permanent hair loss or other skin problems. Fleas feasting on your pet’s blood can lead to anemia and, in rare cases, death.



Photodisc

Ticks can also harm your pet, transmitting infections such as Lyme disease. And pets can bring ticks into the home, exposing you and your family to illness from a tick bite.

Hundreds of pesticides, repellents, and growth inhibitors are available to protect your pet from flea and tick bites. Some of these products are available only from a veterinarian; others can be bought over the counter.

Flea and tick products range from pills given by mouth to collars, sprays, dips, shampoos, powders, and “spot-ons,” liquid products squeezed onto the dog’s or cat’s skin usually between the shoulder blades or down the back. A few spot-on products are available for flea control in ferrets, and fly and tick control in horses.

Pet owners need to be cautious about using flea and tick products safely, says Ann Stohlman, V.M.D., a veterinarian in the Food and Drug Administration’s (FDA) Center for Veterinary Medicine. “You need to

take the time to carefully read the label, the package insert, and any accompanying literature to make sure you’re using the product correctly.”

Regulation of Flea and Tick Products

Flea and tick products for pets are regulated by either FDA or the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

FDA is responsible for regulating animal drugs; however, some products to control external parasites come under the jurisdiction of EPA. FDA and EPA work together to ensure adherence to all applicable laws and regulations. In general, flea and tick products that are given orally or by injection are regulated by FDA.

Before an animal drug is allowed on the market, FDA must “approve” it. Before a pesticide can be marketed, EPA must “register” it.

Both agencies base their decision on a thorough review of detailed information on the product’s safety

and effectiveness provided by the manufacturer or other product sponsor. The sponsor must show that the drug or pesticide meets current safety standards to protect

- the animal
- people in contact with the animal
- the environment

The sponsor must also show that the drug or pesticide produces the claimed effect, and the product must carry specific labeling so that it can be used according to the directions and precautions.

After a product is allowed on the market, manufacturers are required by law to report any side effects of their flea or tick products to the regulating agency.

Caution with Spot-On Products

In April 2009, EPA issued an advisory concerning spot-on pesticide products for flea and tick control in

cats and dogs. The advisory applies to approximately 70 products registered by EPA.

EPA is intensifying its evaluation of these products due to recent increases in the number of reported bad reactions. The reactions range from mild skin irritation to skin burns, seizures, and, in some cases, death. In May 2009, EPA met with registrants of spot-on pet pesticide products to discuss pet incident reports and EPA's plans for enhanced evaluation of these products. EPA's evaluation may result in actions such as additional label restrictions or cancellation of registration to remove certain spot-on products from the market.

Spot-on flea and tick products can be effective treatments, and many people use the products with no harmful effects to their pets. EPA does not advise pet owners to stop using spot-ons, but asks them to use caution and make informed decisions when selecting treatment methods.

EPA advises pet owners to

- carefully follow label directions and monitor their pets for any signs of a bad reaction after application, particularly when using these products for the first time
- talk to a veterinarian about responsible and effective use of flea and tick products

Health Canada (the Canadian federal health department) has identified similar concerns about the use of spot-on flea and tick products, and is working with EPA to address the issue.

When to Treat

It's best to treat your pet at the beginning of flea and tick season, says Stohlman. The length of flea season, which peaks during warm weather months, varies depending on where you live. "It can last four months in some places, but in other places, like Florida, fleas can live all year long," says Stohlman. And fleas can live inside a warm house year-round no

matter where you live.

Ticks are found in some places year-round. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that in most parts of the United States, the greatest chance of infection by a tick bite is spring and summer.

Tips for Using Flea and Tick Products

- Read the label carefully before use. If you don't understand the wording, ask your veterinarian or call the manufacturer. "Even if you've used the product many times before," says Stohlman, "read the label because the directions or warnings may have changed."
- Follow the directions exactly. If the product is for dogs, don't use it on cats or other pets. If the label says use weekly, don't use it daily. If the product is for the house or yard, don't put it directly on your pet.
- Keep multiple pets separated after applying a product until it dries to prevent one animal from grooming another and ingesting a drug or pesticide.
- Talk to your veterinarian before using a product on weak, old, medicated, sick, pregnant, or nursing pets, or on pets that have previously shown signs of sensitivity to flea or tick products.
- Monitor your pet for side effects after applying the product, particularly when using the product on your pet for the first time.
- If your pet experiences a bad reaction from a spot-on product, immediately bathe the pet with mild soap, rinse with large amounts of water, and call your veterinarian.
- Call your veterinarian if your pet shows symptoms of illness after using a product. Symptoms of poisoning include poor appetite, depression, vomiting, diarrhea, or excessive salivation.
- Do not apply a product to kittens or puppies unless the label specifically allows this treatment. Use flea combs to pick up fleas, flea eggs, and ticks on puppies and kittens that are too


young for flea and tick products.

- Wash your hands immediately with soap and water after applying a product, or use protective gloves while applying.
- Store products away from food and out of children's reach.

Source: FDA and CDC

Reporting Problems

Keep the product package after use in case side effects occur. You will want to have the instructions available, as well as contact information for the manufacturer.

- To report problems with spot-on flea or tick products, contact the National Pesticide Information Center (NPIC) at 1-800-858-7378. (<http://npic.orst.edu/contactus.html>)
- To report problems with flea or tick drug products, contact FDA's Consumer Complaint Coordinator for your area. (www.fda.gov/Safety/ReportaProblem/ConsumerComplaintCoordinators/default.htm)
- If your pet needs immediate medical care, call your local veterinarian, a local animal emergency clinic, or the National Animal Poison Control Center at 1-888-426-4435, which charges a fee for consultation. (www.aspc.org/pet-care/poison-control/) 

This article appears on FDA's Consumer Updates page (www.fda.gov/ForConsumers/ConsumerUpdates/default.htm), which features the latest on all FDA-regulated products.

For More Information

EPA's Increased Scrutiny of Flea and Tick Control Products for Pets www.epa.gov/pesticides/health/flea-tick-control.html

Your Guide to Reporting Problems to FDA www.fda.gov/ForConsumers/ConsumerUpdates/ucm095859.htm