PROTECT YOUR PET FROM PESTS

Even indoor cats and four-legged city slickers can pick up fleas and ticks. Here's what to know and how to take preventive steps.

by LIZZ SCHUMER

PESTS CAN BE FOUND IN URBAN AND SUBURBAN AREAS TOO.

Ticks hang out in tall grass, piles of leaves and even overgrown suburban gardens. Fleas can hitch a ride home on your pet from the groomer or doggy day care and can linger on your clothing. “Plus, most ticks spend at least some of their lives on wildlife hosts, such as rodents or deer, which are increasingly found beyond forests and wilderness,” explains Christine Cain, D.V.M., an associate professor of dermatology at the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine. Because completely preventing pets’ exposure can be difficult, experts recommend pest protection for all dogs and cats, even if they never set paw outdoors.

COMMIT TO REGULAR TREATMENT.

Both fleas and ticks can appear pretty much any time, not just in the summer, says Erika de Papp, D.V.M., of MSPCA-Angell in Boston. “Ticks are active at any temperature above freezing, and even if you have only a few days above, you can still see them,” she explains. “From my perspective, there’s no downside to consistent treatment all year.”

BE WARY OF OTC AND NATURAL PEST REMEDIES.

Good over-the-counter wearable, topical and oral treatments exist, but it’s best to trust your veterinarian’s recommendation about treatment. Tell them if your pet swims or is bathed often, as that can make topical products less effective. If you live in an area with a known high tick prevalence, your vet may even advise doubling up on products. Resist the allure of home remedies, though, “It is important for pet owners to remember that ‘natural’ does not always mean ‘safe’ or ‘effective,’” Cain cautions. Treatments like apple cider vinegar and brewer’s yeast are just plain ineffective, while essential oils can irritate pets’ skin, eyes or digestive tracts.

CHECK FOR TICKS OFTEN.

Even after a walk around the block or an afternoon on the porch with your pet, check them (and yourself) for ticks. Inspect their face, ears, legs, armpits and groin, as well as between their toes, for a black dot about the size of a pencil mark. If you find one, the CDC recommends using fine-tipped tweezers to grasp it as close to the skin as possible. Steadily pull it up and off your pet without twisting or squeezing. After you remove the tick, clean the area and your hands with rubbing alcohol or soapy water. Then dispose of the tick by dousing it in rubbing alcohol, placing it in a sealed container, wrapping it with tape or flushing it down the toilet.

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