HEALTH BASICS

Fleas

Fleas are small blood-feeding insects that can bite people and infest animals and homes.

WHAT IT IS
Small, wingless insects that feed on blood

WHERE IT COMES UP
Pet infestations, itchy bites, and household pest control

WHY IT MATTERS
Bites cause irritation and can sometimes spread infections

WHAT IT IS NOT
Not a disease or diagnosis

WHO TO ASK
Primary care clinician, veterinarian, or licensed pest-control service

HOW IT IS CHECKED
Inspection of pets, bedding, clothing, and living areas

Overview

Fleas are tiny, wingless insects that feed on the blood of animals or people. They are parasites, meaning they live on or near another living thing and use it for food. Fleas are not a disease or a diagnosis.

Several flea species can affect human health. Cat fleas are a common household concern and can live on cats, dogs, and some wild animals. Other species are linked to rodents or particular regions of the world.

A flea bite may leave a small, itchy bump. Bites are often found around the ankles or lower legs, but they can occur elsewhere. Their appearance is not specific enough to confirm that fleas were responsible. Mosquitoes, bed bugs, mites, and some skin conditions can look similar.

Finding the source matters. Fleas seen on a person may have come from a pet, wildlife, carpeting, upholstered furniture, bedding, or another part of the environment.

How it works

A flea has four life stages: egg, larva, pupa, and adult. Adult fleas live on a host animal and take

blood meals. Their eggs can fall from the animal into carpets, floor cracks, furniture, pet bedding, or soil.

The eggs hatch into larvae. Larvae avoid light and feed on material in their surroundings. They later form protective cocoons and become pupae. Adult fleas then emerge and look for a host.

This life cycle explains why removing the visible adult fleas may not end an infestation. Eggs, larvae, and pupae may still be present in the home. New adults can appear after the pet has been treated.

Fleas cannot fly, but their strong back legs allow them to jump. They may move between animals or jump onto a person. Most fleas do not remain on humans for long, but they can feed on human blood.

Some fleas can carry infectious organisms. Transmission does not happen with every bite. The risk depends on the flea species, local animals, geographic area, and whether the fleas are infected.

Why it matters for your health

The most direct effect of fleas is skin irritation from bites. The body can react to flea saliva, causing itching, redness, or swelling. Some people have a stronger local allergic reaction than others.

Scratching can break the skin. This can allow bacteria already on the skin or under the fingernails to cause a secondary skin infection.

Fleas are also involved in the spread of certain infections and parasites:

A different condition called tungiasis occurs when a female sand flea burrows into the skin. It is mainly associated with particular tropical and subtropical regions and is not the same as a typical household flea infestation.

- Flea-borne typhus , also called murine typhus, is a bacterial infection. People are usually infected when material from an infected flea, such as flea feces, enters broken skin or the eyes.
- Plague is a bacterial infection associated with rodents and their fleas in certain parts of the world. Human cases are uncommon, but prompt medical care is important when exposure is suspected.
- Dipylidium caninum is a tapeworm. A person can become infected by accidentally swallowing an infected flea, rather than through a flea bite.

- Cat-scratch disease is caused by Bartonella henselae . Fleas help spread the bacteria among cats. People are usually infected through a scratch, bite, or contact with an infected cat rather than through an ordinary flea bite.

What can go wrong

An ordinary flea bite often settles without medical treatment. Problems are more likely when the skin reaction is strong, scratching damages the skin, or the flea is carrying an infectious organism.

Possible related conditions or situations include:

Seek emergency help for trouble breathing, swelling of the face or throat, fainting, or another severe allergic reaction.

Seek urgent medical advice if you develop fever, severe headache, marked weakness, or a widespread rash after flea exposure. Prompt assessment is also appropriate after contact with sick or dead rodents in an area where plague occurs.

Contact a clinician soon if a bite becomes increasingly painful, hot, swollen, or red, or if it drains pus. These changes may suggest a skin infection. Rice-like segments in stool or around the anus can be a sign of tapeworm infection and should be assessed routinely.

- Allergic skin reactions to flea saliva
- Bacterial skin infection around scratched bites
- Flea-borne typhus in areas where it occurs
- Plague after relevant flea, rodent, or animal exposure
- Dipylidium caninum infection after swallowing an infected flea
- Tungiasis after exposure to sand fleas in affected regions
- Ongoing household infestation when eggs and immature fleas remain

What you can do

Look for evidence before assuming that every itchy bump is a flea bite. Adult fleas are small, dark, and fast-moving. On pets, a fine flea comb may collect fleas or black specks called "flea dirt." When placed on a damp white surface, flea dirt may leave a reddish-brown stain because it contains digested blood.

If you have pets, ask a veterinarian about suitable flea control. Use products only for the animal

species, age, and weight stated on the label. A product labeled for dogs may be dangerous to cats. Do not apply veterinary flea products to people.

Household control usually needs to address both pets and the environment. Practical steps include:

Because immature fleas can remain in the environment, control may take time and may require repeated measures. Follow the product label or pest-control plan rather than applying extra pesticide.

For a minor bite, gently wash the area with soap and water. A cool compress may ease itching. Try not to scratch. A pharmacist can advise whether a non-prescription itch treatment is suitable for you, especially for a child, during pregnancy, or if you take other medicines.

There is no routine blood test needed after an ordinary flea bite. Testing is guided by symptoms, travel, location, and animal exposure. Keep a note of when the bites began, where you were, whether pets or wildlife were present, and whether anyone else is affected. Photos of the skin and any insects found may help a clinician, veterinarian, or pest-control professional.

- Wash pet bedding and other washable items using the hottest safe settings
- Vacuum carpets, rugs, upholstered furniture, floor edges, and spaces under furniture
- Empty the vacuum container or bag where fleas cannot return indoors
- Reduce access by rodents or stray animals where this can be done safely
- Use pesticides only as directed on the label
- Ask a licensed pest-control service for help with a persistent infestation

Common questions

Can fleas live on people?

Fleas can bite and briefly remain on people, but common household fleas usually prefer animal hosts. An infestation is more often maintained on pets or in the surrounding environment than on a person's body.

Do fleas mean a home is dirty?

No. Fleas can enter a clean home on pets, wildlife, clothing, or belongings. Clutter and untreated animal resting areas may make control harder, but cleanliness alone does not determine whether fleas appear.

Can I identify fleas from bites alone?

Usually not. Flea bites may occur in small groups and often affect the ankles, but this pattern is not conclusive. Finding fleas or flea dirt on an animal or in the environment provides stronger evidence.

Why are fleas still appearing after treatment?

Adult fleas may continue emerging from cocoons already present in the home. This does not always mean the treatment failed. Continue the recommended pet and environmental plan, following all label instructions.

Should everyone in the home be medically tested?

No routine testing is recommended solely because fleas were found. A clinician may consider testing when someone develops symptoms that fit a flea-associated infection or has a relevant travel, rodent, or animal exposure.

Can fleas move between homes?

Yes. Fleas or their eggs can travel on animals, bedding, furniture, clothing, or other items. In shared buildings, pest-control assessment may need to consider nearby units or common areas.

Sources

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- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. About Flea-borne Typhus . National Center for Emerging and Zoonotic Infectious Diseases
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- United States Environmental Protection Agency. Controlling Fleas and Ticks Around Your Home
- World Health Organization. Tungiasis fact sheet