



Flea Free Naturally



CHRISTIAN MUELLER/SHUTTERSTOCK/OTTERHOUND



Opt for chemical-free pest control.

By Meredith Wargo

Fleas are a nuisance to both dogs and their owners. In addition to making your dog itchy and infesting your home, fleas can transmit tapeworms and cause anemia, especially in young animals. For every flea found on your dog's fur, there can be approximately 30 more living in your home.

Instead of using chemical-based products for treating fleas, natural alternatives are equally effective and provide a healthier environment. "We need to pay attention to the pesticides that we're bringing into our homes," says Barbara Royal, DVM, CVA, president of the American Holistic Veterinary Medical Association and owner of The Royal Treatment Vet Center in Chicago. "Chemical products are made to be toxic to bugs, yet over time they can be toxic to our pets."



Vacuum carpets and sweep and wash floors.

Optimum health

A healthy dog is the best defense for fighting fleas. "It makes a huge difference when animals are healthy and their immune systems are strong," Royal says. "A healthy immune system is relevant for many things, including fighting parasites." Regular exercise and a high-quality diet are essential for optimizing your dog's health. Other complementary therapies that boost the immune system include acupuncture, Chinese herbs and massage therapy.

Daily housekeeping

Flea eggs and larvae make up the majority of flea populations in homes. Keeping your house clean is a relatively simple

way to control fleas. The most effective way to remove flea eggs and larvae is to vacuum the carpet, furniture, curtains and bedding every day. Be thorough and vacuum underneath furniture and in corners. If you have area rugs, consider removing them during flea season.

Sweep and wash non-carpeted floors frequently because flea eggs, larvae and pupae are attracted to the cracks in floors. If

possible, consider keeping your dog restricted to areas in your house that are easy to clean when a flea problem exists. Be sure to dispose of the contents of your vacuum immediately by changing the bags and removing it from your home.

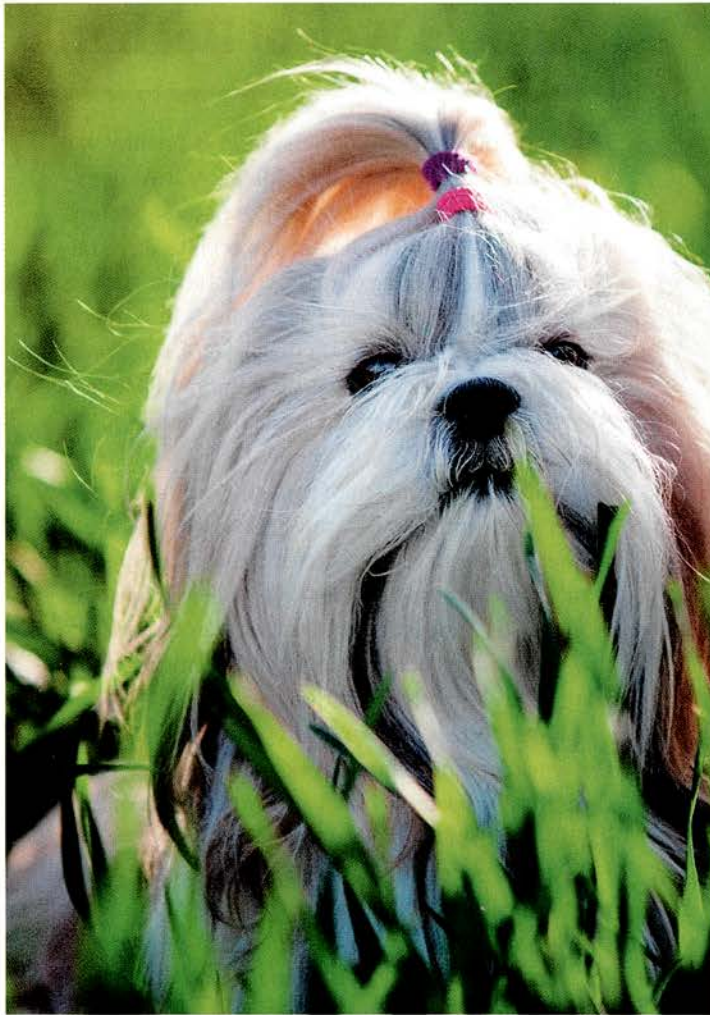


Bathing your dog drowns fleas.

MARILA MASICH/SHUTTERSTOCK/DACHSHUND

Keep grass clipped.

During the height of flea infestation, bathe your dog weekly.



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Fleas 101

There are four stages of the flea life cycle:



Eggs: Adult female fleas lay eggs, which are smaller than a grain of sand, in your dog's fur. As your pet moves around, the eggs fall off and grow wherever they land, including on rugs, furniture and bedding.

Larvae: Eggs turn into larvae, which are worm-like creatures. When environmental conditions are right, larvae will spin silken cocoons within five to 20 days after hatching from their eggs.

Pupae: The cocoon stage can last up to 200 days. The cocoon has a sticky outer coating that isn't easily removed by light vacuuming or sweeping. The cocoon protects the pupae until the adult flea emerges.

Adult: Adult fleas begin searching for food within a few hours after emerging from the cocoon. Females can begin laying eggs within 48 hours, starting the life cycle again. Adult fleas can live from a few weeks to several months on the host animal.

Frequent washing

During the height of flea infestation, bathe your dog weekly. It's not necessary to use medicinal soaps when bathing your dog. A gentle shampoo will kill most fleas by drowning them. Work the shampoo or soap into a thick lather and leave on your pet for 10 minutes. Be sure to rinse your dog completely to remove all of the soap, which will prevent drying his skin.

While you wash your dog, throw his bedding into the washer, too. Using hot water and a mild detergent or vinegar will significantly reduce the number of flea eggs and larvae on the bedding. Placing it in a hot dryer will also help to kill off pesky fleas. Consider placing cedar chips inside your pet's bed stuffing as a natural repellent. Wash your own bedding frequently in hot, soapy water if your dog sleeps with you.

Flea combs

A flea comb is an essential tool for minimizing fleas. It's a quick and safe way to remove adult fleas from your dog's coat

immediately. It also enables you to keep tabs on the flea population.

Flea combs are available in a variety of shapes and sizes, including ergonomic versions. Because the teeth are designed very close together, flea combs pull the fleas and dander from the fur. Comb around your dog's tail, stomach and face, where fleas tend to congregate. Fleas caught in the comb should be drowned in soapy water. Purchase flea combs at local pet stores or veterinary offices.

Diatomaceous earth

Diatomaceous earth (commonly called DE) is a white, chalky-like powder made from crushing the fossils of freshwater organisms. In its natural form, DE is organic, nontoxic and safe for humans and mammals, but is deadly to many external pests, including fleas, ticks and lice. Because DE has sharp edges, it breaks down the exoskeleton of insects and absorbs the moisture in their bodies. This causes the bugs to dehydrate and die.

Sprinkle a light dusting of DE on carpets, bare floors and your pet's bedding, and leave it

Find fleas with a special comb.



Nature's Way of Healing

Ensuring your dog's immune system is healthy will make him a less likely target for fleas. An overuse of antibiotics over time can cause the natural bacteria in a dog's gastrointestinal tract and on his skin to become extinct. "Giving your dog a probiotic, such as tripe, is a good way to get good bacteria into the digestive system," says Barbara Royal, DVM, CVA, president of the American Holistic Veterinary Medical Association and owner of The Royal Treatment Vet Center in Chicago.

Tripe is the stomach of a grazing animal such as cattle, goats and deer. The unique stomachs of these animals have four chambers that break down grasses with a slew of gastric juices, digestive enzymes and amino acids. Tripe is an excellent source of probiotics due to the large number of helpful microorganisms contained within the digestive tract.

"The body is its own environment and we want that environment to be as healthy as it can be," Royal says. "Healthy bacteria plays an important role in boosting the health of your dog's immune system."

Royal recommends feeding your dog green tripe that is either frozen or canned. "Although it smells horrible to humans, dogs absolutely love it."

Consult with your veterinarian to determine the proper amount of tripe to feed your dog. Frozen tripe can be bought from pet stores or online. Raw tripe can be purchased from a butcher or a meat processing place. Tripe is usually fed as a supplement to a dog's main diet.



Diatomaceous earth fights pests indoors and outside.

for as long as possible (up to a few hours). Follow up with a thorough vacuuming to remove the residual powder. DE remains effective as long as it is kept dry and undisturbed. (Due to the dust, it's best to keep animals, children and any family members with asthmatic or upper-respiratory conditions out of the rooms being treated.)

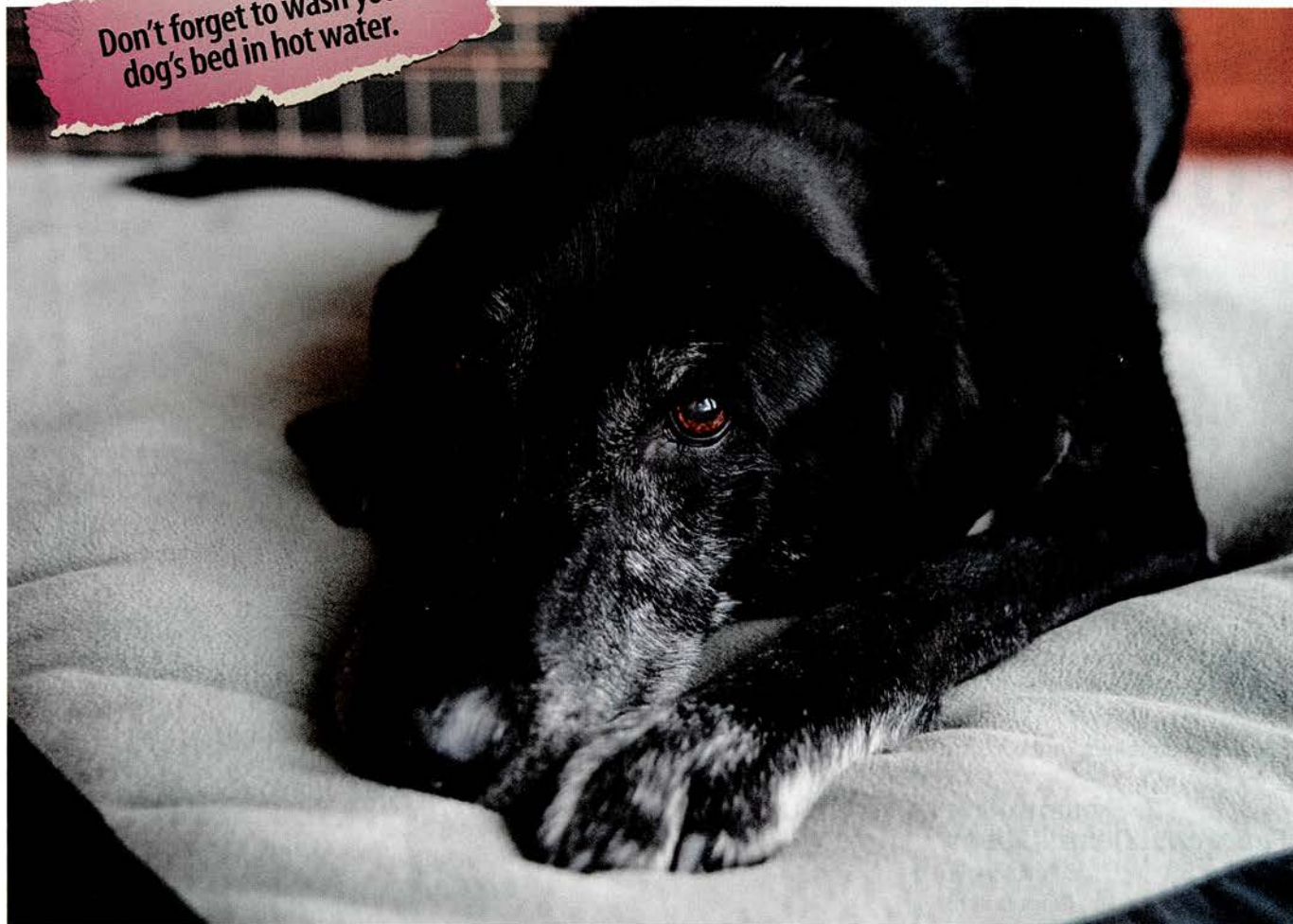
Choose DE that is food grade and not pool-filter grade because the pool-filter grade is toxic if ingested. DE can be purchased at hardware and stores and online.

Essential oils

Natural flea repellent spray can be made by mixing drops of essential oils with water or witch

MONA MAKELA/SHUTTERSTOCK

Don't forget to wash your dog's bed in hot water.



ANNA HOYCHUK/SHUTTERSTOCK

hazel. Lavender, peppermint, rosemary, eucalyptus, lemongrass and citronella are essential oils that repel parasites. Consult with a holistic veterinarian to determine the correct combination and concentration of oils depending on your dog's weight. The solution can be misted or sprayed on a dog's coat using a spray bottle or mixed in with shampoo.

Essential oils also soothe and heal irritated skin while boosting the immune system. Be aware that cats are extremely sensitive to essential oils and require different dosages than dogs. Do not use the same spray on both species. Have your holistic vet dose and dilute the sprays correctly to make sure you are not endangering your resident felines.


Outdoor maintenance

Controlling outdoor flea populations is an important part of an overall flea control program. Keep grass and shrubs clipped short, especially where your dog spends time. Also rake leaves, pine needles and twigs to prevent places where flea eggs, larvae and pupae can harbor. Consider spreading beneficial nematodes

throughout your yard as a natural way to control fleas. Nematodes are microscopic worms that kill flea larvae and pupae by feeding on them. They work especially well in humid climates and in sandy soil away from direct sunlight. Nematodes can be purchased at garden supply stores or nurseries.

DE can be sprinkled around a home's perimeter as well as throughout yards and gardens for helping control a variety of pests. In humid climates, it's best to apply every month; otherwise, it can be applied less frequently, unless it has rained.

A stitch in time

Toxin-free solutions for flea control can be more time consuming and labor intensive than traditional chemical treatments, but it's worth the investment for the sake of your dog's health. "There are a lot of conditions for which we don't have a topical drug, yet we deal with the problems," Royal says. "Just because something is a quick fix doesn't mean it's a good solution." 

Meredith Wargo is an award-winning freelance writer in Houston.