

General Practice Service
Willows Information Sheets

Ectoparasites (fleas and other skin parasites) in cats



*Flea**Tick**Mite**Louse*

Ectoparasites (fleas and other skin parasites) in cats

What types of skin parasites can affect cats?

Fleas

Fleas are the most common skin parasites found on cats, in fact almost every cat which is allowed to go outside will be infested with fleas at some point during his or her lifetime. Adult fleas live on the cat and feed on blood. Each female flea lays up to 50 eggs per day and these fall off the cat into the surrounding area. The development of the next flea generation then takes place in the house and anywhere else that the cat has access to. It is very important to remember this when treating a flea problem, as these areas need to be treated, too. Some animals with fleas do not show any obvious skin disease, whereas others can develop severe irritation, hair loss and inflamed or secondarily infected skin, depending on the sensitivity of the individual animal. As flea infestations can quickly get out of hand, sometimes up to the point where professionals may have to be employed to decontaminate the house, it is important either to prevent a flea problem or to treat it thoroughly as soon as it is noticed.

'Sticktight' flea

In rare cases cats can be affected by the rabbit 'sticktight' flea (*Spilopsyllus cuniculi*), a parasite usually affecting rabbits ears. This flea causes skin lesions on the ear flap (pinna). It lives and feeds in only one place on the skin and does not usually move away when the ears are examined. Only cats who are in contact with wild rabbits, e.g. cats who hunt them, will be affected.

Ticks

Ticks are found on cats less frequently than on dogs, as cats tend to groom themselves more thoroughly. However, despite this some cats seem to be regularly affected by ticks, and these parasites can also latch onto other animals and humans. Several types of tick are found in the UK. In most cases they only cause local irritation and localised infections. However, in some parts of the UK ticks can transmit more generalised infectious diseases and in other countries they commonly transmit a variety of unpleasant infections. Ticks will not stay long on the cat, they burrow their head into the skin, fill their bodies with the cat's blood and then drop off. Ticks are a problem from spring to autumn, and especially in late spring and early autumn. Only cats that spend time outside will be affected by ticks.

Mites

Mites come in different shapes and sizes. They affect cats less commonly than dogs, again probably because cats groom themselves much more thoroughly.

Scabies

The *Sarcoptes* mite or 'fox mite' causes scabies, which is a very itchy and uncomfortable skin disease. It is common in dogs and only rarely affects cats. Foxes can also be affected by scabies. Although the mites spend their entire life-cycle on affected cats, they can survive for up to 3 weeks away from their host. The mites burrow tunnels through the skin where they live and lay their eggs. Because they actually live inside the skin, they cannot be seen on the outside and brushing and bathing will not remove them. In the early stages of the disease many cats are not itchy, so the problem may not always be immediately apparent to the owner. Later, however, the discomfort becomes extreme.

Notoedres

The Notoedric mange mite is another rare parasite in cats in the UK. It usually affects the head and especially the ears. Notoedres infections are occasionally mistaken for scabies, and infections with this mite are intensely itchy. Hair loss and sore skin are obvious signs of the disease. Later the skin typically becomes covered with greyish scales and crusts. Notoedres mites can also affect rabbits and, very rarely, dogs.

Cheyletiella

Cats affected by *Cheyletiella* mites are most commonly long-haired. Dogs and rabbits can also be affected. *Cheyletiella* mites

live on the surface of the skin and spend their entire life on the animal. Adult mites can live in the environment for 10 to 14 days. Affected animals are often presented with crusty or scabby skin, and although most patients have only mild or no itchiness, occasionally severe discomfort develops. Sometimes mites can be seen on the hair ('walking dandruff').

Demodex

Demodex is a special type of mite. It is present in small numbers in the majority of normal cats and usually does not cause any clinical signs. Occasionally, localised scabby itchy spots can appear or cats can develop mild ear infections due to *demodex* mites. In rare cases the mites can spread over the whole body of affected cats and cause generalised problems. This is almost always a sign of a significant underlying disease which has reduced the function of the immune system – a normal immune system would keep the mites in check. Although a generalised *Demodex* infection usually causes less severe skin disease in cats than in dogs, the prognosis is always guarded and further diagnostic tests are necessary to identify any underlying disease process. The treatment of generalised cases can be difficult and frustrating. Animals affected by *Demodex* are often not as itchy as may be expected with other types of mite infestation.

Harvest mites

Harvest mites are generally only a problem in summer and early autumn. Mite larvae are found mainly on the feet (especially between the toes), but also on the legs, occasionally the head/ears and the tummy of affected cats. They will not stay, but only feed for several days and then leave the animal. Infested cats can show signs ranging from no symptoms at all to intense itching. Larvae are often visible as small orange/red patches on the skin. Itchiness may persist for a while after the mites have gone.

Lice

Infestation with lice, a common problem in humans, is actually rare in cats. Cats have different lice to humans, so humans cannot catch lice from cats and vice versa. The entire life-cycle of lice is completed on the cat within 3 weeks. Clinical signs range from no symptoms at all to severe skin disease. Most affected animals are presented with a dry scruffy looking coat, some hair loss and varying degrees of itchiness.

How do cats get skin parasites?**Fleas**

Fleas are easily transmitted from cat to cat or from other animals (e.g. dogs, hedgehogs) to cats. Fleas can also be picked up when cats enter an environment, e.g. a house or car where developing fleas are lying in wait. Lastly, fleas can be carried by humans who handle cats, even if the human carrier is not subjected to bites.

Ticks

Ticks are found on trees, bushes and in areas of denser vegetation and they are able to sense when a cat or other animal passes by. They then drop or crawl onto the cat and start sucking blood. Ticks are not transmitted from cats to other animals or human beings.

Sarcoptes

Sarcoptes mites are often transmitted by direct contact. However, as the mites can live away from their host for up to 3 weeks, cats can be infected even without coming in direct contact with an affected animal.

Cheyletiella and Notoedres

Cheyletiella and Notoedres mites are usually transmitted from animal to animal through direct contact. Very rarely, cats can pick up mites from the environment.

Demodex

Demodex mites are probably only transmitted during the first hours of life from mother to newborn kittens. Most animals never show symptoms, as they will only appear if the immune system is unable to control the mites.

Harvest mites

Harvest mites most commonly live in areas of well-drained ground with heavy vegetation, so the larvae will infest cats that frequent such areas. Even though the individual larvae do not stay long on the cat, it is possible for cats to be infested on a regular basis when they often go to the areas where the mites are found.

Lice

Lice are transmitted by direct contact or by grooming a cat with a contaminated brush or comb. Louse infestations are more common when many cats are together in a relatively small space, such as a cattery, a rescue centre or at a cat show.

What are the clinical signs of skin parasites in cats?

All skin parasites usually cause pruritus (itchy skin). Depending on the type and number of parasites involved this can range from an occasional scratch to continuous and extreme itching and self-mutilation. Partly due to the parasite and partly due to scratching, other clinical signs develop, including hair loss, red spots, pustules, scales, crusts and sore areas of skin. Very often bacteria grow on the affected skin and cause a secondary bacterial infection, which aggravates the situation and confuses the issue, making diagnosis more difficult. Some animals can become generally unwell.

Even if the parasite cannot readily be seen, the pattern of affected areas on the body and/or the changes of the skin can occasionally point towards a diagnosis. However, further tests are usually necessary to determine what is going on. Ticks are an exception – they are usually very obvious once they have filled with blood.

Can humans get skin parasites from cats?**Fleas**

Fleas will often bite humans, causing itchy red spots on the skin. Treating the cat is sufficient to stop the problem, as animal fleas cannot live long on humans.

Lice

Cat lice cannot be transmitted to humans and human lice will not go onto cats.

Ticks

Ticks and harvest mites can affect humans as well as animals. They are not transmitted by cats, but humans will pick them up from the environment in the same way as cats.

Sarcoptes, Notoedres and Cheyletiella

Sarcoptes, Notoedres and Cheyletiella mites frequently pass from infected pets to their owners and cause intensely itchy red spots and crusts on human skin. However, after treating the mites on the cat, disease in humans is usually self-limiting and does not require additional treatment.

Demodex

Demodex mites are not transmitted from cats to humans, although humans have their own version of demodex infection.

How can skin parasites be prevented or treated?**Fleas**

Fleas should be treated with a quality spot-on preparation. In rare cases, a spray may also be used on the animal. Flea collars, shampoos and powders are no longer recommended. Treatment of the cat's environment (house, car etc) is very important and the treatment of all pets should be continued over a period of at least 3 months to ensure all the next flea generations have gone. It is generally preferable to prevent rather than to treat a flea infestation and to use spot-on preparations on a regular basis. This has to be done every 4 to 8 weeks depending on the product used. It is important to note that some dog preparations which are perfectly safe in dogs are very dangerous when they are used on cats, and can cause severe and sometimes fatal toxic reactions.

'Sticktight' fleas

'Sticktight' fleas are treated by insecticide products applied to the ears. Treatment of the environment is not necessary in this case as the fleas cannot reproduce on cats. As not all products are suitable, please contact us if you suspect this rare condition in your cat.

Ticks

Ticks should be removed individually with a tick remover, taking care that the mouthparts are removed in order to avoid causing a nasty skin reaction. All other procedures such as covering the tick in oil,

alcohol or glue should never be used because, although transmission of disease by ticks is a rare problem in the UK, such methods of killing ticks encourage the transmission of disease, as the slowly dying tick can regurgitate infectious agents back into the patient. Several – but not all – of the spot-on products will prevent ticks from biting, so if your cat is prone to getting ticks, please contact us for advice on suitable products. Most products in use for dogs are again very toxic for cats, so special cat products against ticks have to be used.

Mites

Mites are also treated by spot-on products and occasionally by use of medicinal shampoos or washes. As not all products are suitable for every type of mite, we will advise you of the most appropriate treatment in each individual case.

Demodex

The treatment of demodex mites is different. Demodex mites are much more difficult to get rid of and the underlying immune problem also has to be taken into account. Treatment is intense and stretches over a considerable number of weeks. While treatment may be very successful, it can be frustrating and, depending on any underlying condition, the prognosis may be guarded.

Lice

Lice can be treated with most of the spot-on preparations that are used to treat or prevent fleas. Treatment of the environment is not necessary, although grooming equipment (combs, brushes etc) should be thoroughly cleaned.

If you have any queries or concerns about ectoparasites and your cat, please do not hesitate to [contact us](#).



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