

# Fleas and other parasites

[cats.org.uk](https://cats.org.uk)



**A parasite is an organism that lives and feeds on another.**

## **How do I tell if my cat has parasites?**

With some parasites it can be hard to tell. A cat may not show any signs of infection but it doesn't mean that they are free from parasites. In many cases infections only become obvious when the number of parasites is too great for the cat to tolerate comfortably.

## **How do I treat parasites?**

Ideally, treatment will be determined based on your cat's individual risks and lifestyle. Your vet can discuss this with you.

### **Things to remember:**

- veterinary products are highly effective and safe. It is essential to follow product instructions carefully
- if not used correctly some products can be toxic to cats and other animals, especially fish. Always read the instructions fully
- for spot-on treatments or sprays, let the product dry before touching your cat's fur
- cats don't build up immunity to parasites so regularly treat them to avoid reinfection

# External parasites

## Fleas

Fleas are the most common skin parasite your cat might encounter. They are not fussy about which species of animal they live on. They don't live on humans but will bite them. The most common flea found on cats and dogs is the cat flea. They are one to three millimetres in size and reddish-brown to black in colour.

### Flea lifecycle

Adult fleas live permanently on their animal host. Centrally heated homes with fitted carpets provide ideal warm and humid conditions for fleas to develop all year round.

In the right conditions this whole cycle can be completed quickly:

- the female flea produces eggs at a rate of 50 a day
- the eggs fall off the cat and hatch into larvae in two to 16 days
- they then change into pupae in a cocoon
- an adult develops in the cocoon and awaits signals suggesting the presence of a cat, such as heat, exhaled carbon dioxide and vibrations

- the flea will emerge and attach to the cat in seconds
- if no host is present, the flea can wait in the cocoon for up to two years

### **What are the signs of fleas?**

An itchy cat or insect bites on your ankle may be the only signs of infestation. Unless cats are allergic to flea bites, they often show remarkably very little response.

Fleas move around at great speed making them difficult to spot.

The best way to check is:

- to place the cat on a sheet of white paper and comb them well
  - a fine-toothed flea comb may trap only one or two fleas
  - black specks of 'flea dirt' (flea poo consisting of undigested cat blood) can usually be found on the paper
  - when placed on damp cotton wool, flea dirt slowly dissolves producing bloody streaks
  - flea dirt may also be found where the cat sleeps

## **Flea allergies**

Many cats are allergic to flea saliva so bites make them very itchy. They may develop:

- inflamed skin
- hair loss, due to overgrooming
- thickened, oozing or crusty skin
- lots of small scabs, especially at the base of the tail or around the neck

The condition should be treated by a vet, but treatment will only be effective if the cat's home is totally cleared of both fleas and their eggs. Just one flea can cause a problem for allergic cats.

## **How to treat fleas**

For effective control, adult fleas on the cat must be killed and the home treated to prevent both the cat and home being reinfested. Always let your vet know of any flea treatments that you've used before. This is important before they prescribe other flea control products or medication, and if your cat needs sedation or anaesthetic.

The most effective flea control products are available from your vet who will also provide advice on their use.

**Warning!** Products intended for dogs should not be used on cats as they can be toxic.

## **Killing adult fleas**

A wide range of products are available to kill adult fleas on the cat. These include spot-on treatments, tablets, collars, sprays, shampoos and powders. Finding the right product for your cat is important because a product that is difficult to apply is unlikely to succeed.

Shampoos and powders don't work for long and there is no lasting effect. These can also cause stress to your cat when applying them. Many collars are also not very effective. Your vet will be able to recommend the best type of product for your cat.

## **Removing fleas in the home**

- Use an environmental flea product, usually available as a spray, to get rid of fleas in your carpets and furnishings
- Sprays for the home should never be used directly on your cat. Ask your vet for advice on choosing a suitable product
- Frequent vacuuming can help to reduce numbers of fleas, but it will not get rid of them
- Anything that is heavily infested, such as pet bedding, should be thrown away. Other bedding or blankets should be washed at 60 degrees Celsius

## **Prevention**

To stop your cat getting fleas again you need to use a product that:

- can kill existing adult fleas on your cat
- provides control by interrupting the flea's life cycle

Remember that all the animals in the household must be treated. This includes any dogs or house rabbits, using appropriate products for their species.

## **Why control fleas?**

While many cats live with fleas and show minimal signs of infestation, control is advisable because:

- the cat flea carries tapeworm larvae and cats can swallow fleas while grooming
- adult fleas feed on cats' blood. This can cause life-threatening anaemia (blood loss) in young kittens
- fleas can transmit other infections
- some cats develop an allergy to flea bites
- cat fleas can cause itchy bites on humans

A flea infestation can take weeks or months to get under control. It is much easier to prevent one.

The risk of getting fleas depends on a cat's lifestyle.

Your vet can help you decide on the best treatment regime based on your cat's individual risk; such as contact with other cats or animals or whether they spend a lot of time outdoors.

Find out more: [cats.org.uk/fleas](https://cats.org.uk/fleas)

## **Ticks**

Ticks are most commonly found on moorland and in long grass or woodland. Cats generally seem untroubled by ticks but they can transmit disease.

### **Tick lifecycle**

Ticks hide in tall grass, bushes or brush. When an animal passes by, the tick climbs up the legs and attaches to the animal. The unfed tick is about the size of a pinhead. The tick buries its head into the skin and remains on the host for about five days, gorging on blood. The tick can grow up to half an inch in length and will look greyish-blue or brownish-black in colour.

### **What are the signs of ticks?**

The first sign is a small dot attached to your cat's skin. As a tick feeds it gets larger and can sometimes be mistaken for a wart or lump.

## **How to treat ticks**

Ticks should be removed by your vet, or by following their advice, otherwise the mouthparts could be left behind which can lead to infection or an abscess. Never try to burn off a tick.

## **How to prevent ticks**

Products come in various forms and your vet will be able to recommend the most appropriate type.

## **Why control ticks?**

If untreated, ticks can cause infection, sore patches and abscesses.

Ticks can carry Lyme disease which can affect humans and animals. This is uncommon but is another good reason for having a tick removed as soon as possible.

There are more tick-borne diseases in mainland Europe and other countries. If you take your cat abroad, tick control is very important.

Find out more: [cats.org.uk/ticks](https://cats.org.uk/ticks)

## Lice

An infestation of lice is uncommon. Unlike fleas, lice found on cats will not affect humans or any other animal. They can be passed between cats by direct contact.

### **What are the signs of lice?**

Translucent eggs attached to the cat's hairs are usually noticed first. Cats may also be itchy, have broken hairs from scratching, or have some crusty patches on the skin.

### **How to treat and prevent lice**

Some flea control products will also kill lice. The major difference in lice control is that the lice eggs remain on the cat and are not killed straight away. Your vet can prescribe a suitable product to ensure that hatching lice are killed as well as the adults. It is advisable to dispose of the cat's bedding but there is no need to treat the whole house.

### **Why control lice?**

Scratching can result in injury to the skin. In severe cases, raw areas can occur which can become infected.

# Mites

Mites are tiny parasites that are only just visible to the naked eye. They cause a range of skin conditions which are highly contagious. These pass from cat to cat by direct contact, or via infected bedding and grooming equipment. The most common types of mites found on cats are ear mites, harvest mites and mange mites.

## Ear mites

Ear mites live deep inside the cat's ear. They cause intense irritation to the ear canal, causing excessive amounts of dark wax. Cats with ear mites may appear unconcerned or they may constantly shake their head and scratch.

## What are the signs of ear mites?

The wax can be easily seen inside of the ear. To see the mites themselves your vet will need to examine some of the ear wax under a microscope. Untreated ear mites can lead to secondary infections, swelling or chronic thickening of the ear.

## How to treat ear mites

Products available from the vet to kill ear mites include ear drops and spot-on treatments. If the infestation is heavy, the vet may use an ear cleaner to loosen and soften the wax first.

The treatment may need to be continued over several weeks as eggs hatch, releasing a new generation of mites to treat.

### **Harvest mites**

Harvest mites are also known as harvest bugs or bracken bugs. They are bright orange in colour and are usually found in woodland and grassy areas during late summer and autumn. Harvest mites may cause discomfort to both humans and cats.

### **What are the signs of harvest mites?**

In cats, the irritation can cause reddening of the skin and crusted areas. Most often this affects areas where there is only a thin covering of hair such as the ears and face. You may see the mites which look like clusters of small orange/red dots on the skin.

### **How to treat harvest mites**

Some flea control products prescribed by the vet can prevent and cure infestation. Hypersensitive cats may need steroid treatment and a head cone may be used to prevent them scratching and biting the itchy parts.

### **Mange mites**

Mange mites are uncommon in cats. They generally cause itching and scabs and can only be diagnosed by examining skin scrapings under a microscope. Mange mites can only be treated by a vet.

## Why control mites?

Scratching can result in injury to the skin and in severe cases raw areas can occur which may become infected.

## Maggots

Cats occasionally become infected by maggots when blow flies, also known as bluebottles, lay eggs in an open wound or soiled skin and hair. They are usually only found in incontinent animals, or cats that have been injured and have been hiding or unable to return home. Healthy cats are rarely affected but any open wound should be checked by a vet and their advice followed. Soiled fur should be cleaned carefully.

Fly eggs hatch after 24 to 48 hours and develop into maggots. Maggots need food to turn into flies, so begin to eat the animal's flesh. They start with diseased or dead tissue but quickly progress to eating healthy areas.

Left untreated, cats lose considerable amounts of fluid and may suffer from toxic shock. Death can follow within a few days so any maggot infection should be treated by a vet immediately.

Find out more: [cats.org.uk/skin-problems-in-cats](https://cats.org.uk/skin-problems-in-cats)

## Internal parasites

The two groups of internal parasites most commonly found in cats are tapeworms and roundworms, both of which live in the gut.

Find out more: [cats.org.uk/worms](https://cats.org.uk/worms)

## Tapeworms

Tapeworms are flat, tape-like worms that are common in the gut of most mammals, including cats.

### What are the signs of tapeworms?

Tapeworms consist of a head which attaches itself to the wall of the gut by either suckers or hooks, and a series of segments containing eggs. These segments break off and are passed out with the poo. They are sometimes visible in the poo, around the cat's anus or in bedding. They resemble small grains of rice and may move.

### Tapeworm lifecycle

Once outside of the cat the segments disintegrate, releasing eggs. The eggs themselves are not infectious to cats. They have to pass through a host to be able to complete their life cycle. The host varies for different types of tapeworm, but the cat will become infected when they eat an infected host such as a flea or rodent.

Tapeworms are transmitted to cats by fleas so it is likely that:

- a cat with fleas will have tapeworms
- a cat with tapeworms will have fleas

The worms live by absorbing digested food in the gut of the cat. They are rarely harmful except where heavy infestations cause gut obstructions or weight loss.

## **Roundworms**

Roundworms are the most common intestinal parasite in cats. Adult roundworms look like a white earthworm and they can grow up to 10cm in length.

### **Roundworm lifecycle**

Adult worms live in the cat's gut and feed on digested food. Their eggs are passed in the poo but the entire worm is not usually passed.

The eggs are not infectious to other cats when first passed but become infectious after a few days when they develop into larvae. They may remain infectious for years until eaten.

Roundworms can be passed through the milk of a cat to her kittens. This is a very common route of infection. If the mum cat has roundworm we can assume that most kittens suckling will also be infected.

## **How to treat and prevent worms**

Vets can provide effective treatment for worms in cats. Some worming medications combat both roundworm and tapeworm, while others are only effective against one or the other.

### **Kittens**

Information on worming kittens is currently limited. Most guidance is based on studies carried out in puppies. However, puppies can become infected while in the womb, whereas kittens only become infected after birth, via the mother's milk.

If there is concern that a mother cat has worms which may have been passed to her kittens, we recommend they should be treated with a suitable product from three to four weeks of age. Veterinary guidance should be sought before treatment.

From eight weeks to six months of age healthy kittens will usually need monthly treatment against roundworms. Tapeworm treatment may also be needed.

Kittens should be weighed prior to every worming treatment to ensure the correct dosage is given.

### **Adult cats**

Adult cats usually need to be treated against both roundworms and tapeworms every one to six months. The frequency of treatment recommended will vary depending on the cat's lifestyle for example whether

the cat goes outdoors, hunts and whether they are regularly treated for fleas.

Veterinary guidance should be sought before deciding what to use and how often.

### **Why control worms?**

When cats have lots of worms it can cause:

- weight loss
- vomiting
- diarrhoea
- irritation around the anus
- failure to thrive, particularly in young kittens

Roundworms can sometimes infect humans, but provided the litter tray is emptied and cleaned daily, there is no risk from the fresh poo.

Tapeworm infection of humans is not common. When it does occur, it is usually in children who have eaten a flea which contains the larvae of the tapeworm.

Worming and defleaing your cat regularly, based on their risk and lifestyle, will ensure the risk is absolutely minimal.

## **Looking for cat advice?**

The following vet-approved guides are available as PDF downloads from

**[cats.org.uk/information-leaflets](https://cats.org.uk/information-leaflets)**

## Essential guides

- Caring for your cat W84001
- Welcome home W84002
- Moving home W84003
- Feeding and obesity W84004
- Keeping your cat safe W84005
- Neutering W84006
- When to let go W84007
- Microchipping W84008
- Understanding your cat's behaviour W84009
- Managing your cat's behaviour W84010
- Cats living together W84011
- Indoor and outdoor cats W84012
- Cats and people W84014
- Caring for your kitten W84015
- Elderly cats W84016
- Feral cats W84017
- Pregnant cats, birth and care of young kittens W84018

## Veterinary guides

- Arthritis W83201
- Feline lower urinary tract disease (FLUTD) W83202
- Itchy cats and skin disorders W83204
- Kidney or renal disease W83206
- Feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) and feline leukaemia virus (FeLV) W83209
- Heart murmurs and heart disease W83211
- Hyperthyroidism W83212
- Teeth and oral health W83214
- Fleas and other parasites W83215
- Cat flu W83216
- Infectious disease and vaccination W83217
- Digestive disorders: vomiting and diarrhoea W83218

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## Please see [cats.org.uk](https://www.cats.org.uk) for more information on:

- Cats and the law
- Diabetes
- Feline parvovirus (FPV)
- Cats with disabilities
- Hypertension
- Feline coronavirus (FCoV) and feline infectious peritonitis (FIP)
- Feline asthma
- You and your vet
- Cats and pregnant women: toxoplasmosis

For more information about Cats Protection or to find out how you can support us, go to **[cats.org.uk](https://cats.org.uk)**



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