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U. S. Department of Agriculture

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HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

Tuesday, Sept. 1, 1931

(NOT FOR PUBLICATION)

Subject: "Some Facts About Fleas." Information from the Bureau of Entomology, U.S.D.A.

Bulletin available: "Fleas and Their Control."

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Until yesterday I had thought--and hoped--that we wouldn't have to bring up the subject of insects again this season. I am referring now, of course, to those unpleasant insects with annoying habits. A few weeks ago, however, the children in the Jones household, around the corner, adopted two stray cats, and, unfortunately, along with the cats, they adopted innumerable fleas. These fleas have caused all kinds of trouble. Mrs. Jones came over yesterday to tell me about it.

"When I first noticed that our new pets had fleas, I wasn't much worried, because I had always supposed that cat fleas only bothered cats and dog fleas only lived on dogs and so on. But I was sadly mistaken. These fleas are now hopping all over our home, biting both cats and children. We're having a perfectly terrible time. I don't know how to get rid of the horrid things. Just to think that I've watched poor scratching dogs all my life and only lately realized how much sympathy they deserved. Can't you tell me, Aunt Sanny, of some way to rid the house and the cats of these pests?"

You can see, after hearing a story like that, that it was up to me to go out in search of all the information I could find about fleas. The place to go, naturally, was the Bureau of Entomology where the scientists have made studies of the many insects that annoy man and animals.

Annoy, did I say? That is too mild a word. Fleas are worse than mere annoyances. The scientists have discovered that they are disease carriers as well. The dread bubonic plague, for example, has been found to be transmitted largely, if not entirely, through these insects. A kind of tapeworm, which infests dogs and occasionally people, is also carried by fleas.

Fleas have been known to make houses impossible to live in for a time and occasionally to cause large losses in poultry and annoyances to other animals. And a flea would just as readily bite a human as a dog--and does. Just ask Mrs. Jones if this isn't true.



Though there are 500 known species of fleas in existence, less than a dozen are of special interest as pests to man and domestic animals. These include human fleas, dog fleas, cat fleas, stick-tight fleas and rat fleas. This last variety is the kind that carries the bubonic plague.

The scientists have discovered a lot of interesting facts about the life of the flea. They know, for example, how long he lives, what his habits are, what kind of climate and weather he likes, what food he eats, how he spends his time and all sorts of other interesting things about his temperament and personality.

A full-grown flea may live anywhere from two days to a year, depending on whether he strikes fortunate living conditions. But before he becomes fullgrown he has to pass through four distinct stages. First, the eggs are laid in the fur or feathers of the animal acting as host to this insect. The eggs are white or cream-colored and ovoid in shape. They usually fall out into the nest or resting place of the animal, so large numbers of them may be seen on mats or cushions upon which infested dogs or cats sleep. The larvae hatch from these eggs and these little white active worms live on various animal or vegetable debris. Presently they spin a cocoon and go into the pupa stage. The full-grown biting flea hatches from this cocoon. The complete life cycle of a flea may be passed in as short a period as 17 days, but under adverse conditions or during cool weather the total period from egg to adult may extend considerably over a year.

And, speaking of weather, climate and so forth, this has a great deal to do with the way the flea conducts his life. In general, fleas are never as abundant during winter and spring as they are in summer and fall. In the extreme Southern states, however, fleas often become very lively and annoying in the late spring and early summer, especially when rains are frequent and the humidity high. As a rule, fleas flourish during rainy summers and extremely hot, dry weather tends to check their breeding. It is also common knowledge that fleas occur in greatest abundance in sandy regions.

In the eastern part of the United States, the dog flea is the greatest household pest. Many times, houses, particularly those vacated for the summer, will be found in the fall literally overrun by these fleas. In portions of the South and West where the human flea is the most common, the same thing often occurs. When small numbers of fleas are found on people in houses, breeding places should be sought out of doors in sheds or barns frequented by dogs and cats, especially if the house is kept clean and animals do not frequent it.

Sometimes pet dogs or cats are kept about the household during the spring and early summer, and great numbers of eggs are deposited on them by the fleas. These eggs are scattered about the floors and soon hatch into minute maggots, which feed upon the vegetable and animal matter under carpets and matings and in cracks. During this period the house may have been closed up for the summer, so the fleas are free to live and grow without disturbance. About the time the occupants of the house return home



in the fall the fleas are full-grown and are all ready for them. They are very hungry and ready to attack man or any animals available.

Sometimes houses become infested with fleas from breeding places beneath. The fleas in these cases are furnished by stray animals which sleep under the buildings. The larva develop and feed in the accumulations of dust and vegetable matter, and, when they develop into fleas, come up into the house.

So much for the flea's life and habits. Now, how to get rid of him.

The first step is to rid the cats or dogs of the adult fleas which may be laying eggs. Dogs may be washed in a mild creosote solution. Cats and also dogs may be powdered with pyrethrum. Hogs may be sprinkled lightly with crude petroleum.

After getting rid of the adult flea, the next move is to go after the young fleas in their various stages. Bedding for animals should be changed frequently. Spray the floor where the young fleas develop, with creosote oil, and clean up all rubbish where young fleas develop. Fleas breed in greatest numbers in soil or dust containing vegetable or animal matter which is protected from wind, rain and sun, but at the same time is furnished with a certain amount of moisture. Don't let the cats, dogs, or chickens go under the house or other buildings, since this will be the ideal place for fleas to start. Any infested areas inside or out should be sprayed with creosote oil or the ground where the young fleas are developing may be covered with salt and thoroughly wet down. Creosote oil is for sale at paint stores.

When fleas get into the house, remove the pet animals and the rugs and scrub the floors thoroughly with soap and water and afterward wash it with gasoline. In bad infestations sprinkle the floors with naphtholene flakes and let this material remain without sweeping up for a day or two, and remember that the fur of pet animals may be rubbed with dorris powder or they may be washed with a rather weak solution of saponified creosote or kerosene emulsion.

That's all I have to tell you about fleas today. If you are interested in the subject and would like more details, there's a bulletin published by the Bureau of Entomology that is both instructive--and interesting reading. It is called "Fleas and Their Control."

Tomorrow: "Fall Clothes for School Wear."

