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Jay Plechner gives flea bath to unhappy client.

Three-Point Program Puts the Bite on Fleas

By LYNN SIMROSS, *Times Staff Writer*

The sign in a West Hollywood pet supply store says it all: "THEY'RE BACK." The subject matter isn't poltergeists. It's fleas, those nasty critters that invade Southern California homes and yards every summer, causing animals and owners to itch and scratch.

The tiny black insects—which are so acrobatic that they can jump 8 inches vertically or 13 inches horizontally—seem to be everywhere.

Actually, in Southern California, the pests never really go away. In winter, fleas are in a dormant stage. But by summer, they can reach near-epidemic form, when the temperatures and humidity are higher.

Dr. Alfred Plechner, a veterinarian at California Animal Hospital in West Los Angeles who specializes in pet allergies and nutrition, recommends that clients with flea infestations spray their yards three times at 10-day intervals. "That usually sets them back pretty well and will contain them," he said. "But you have to get rid of them in the house and on the dog or cat at the same time."

In his prevention program, he tells owners to start yard spraying in the spring, when fleas come out of the inactive stage, then to spray

in mid-summer and in the fall. At each spraying, he advises, "wait an hour then water everything to the roots." You may get better results by spraying after sunset as the hot sun evaporates the spray more quickly.

Plechner said he believes that controlling fleas "takes a whole bunch of prevention. People let things go until they have a major problem. Most of it is just common sense and caring enough for your animals."

Many veterinarians downplay the effectiveness of chemical or natural-ingredient flea collars (natural models use citronella or eucalyptus). Some say they don't work at all; others say the collars work on some animals but only to keep fleas off their head and neck. And what of the high-tech collars that produce ultrasonic sound that supposedly drives away fleas? "I'd say they work 10% of the time from what clients who've tried them say," Plechner said.

Natural Remedies

Most veterinarians don't think much of natural remedies such as feeding pets garlic, Brewer's yeast or vitamin B. They caution that natural and chemical products can produce skin allergies in animals, showing up in symptoms such as skin redness, scaling and hair loss.

If you're searching for nontoxic, flea-fighting pet shampoos for your dog, Plechner recommends low-suds Amway soap or Head & Shoulders dandruff shampoo, which he said "knocks . . . out fleas. Nobody tells people the more baths—not flea baths but just baths—the merrier to keep fleas off."

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