

(Earth Talk) Toxic flea collars

Written by EarthTalk® □ From the Editors of E/The Environmental Magazine.
Wednesday, 12 May 2010 13:43



Dear EarthTalk: *I'm told that, despite improvements in recent years, pesticides in flea collars are still harmful to pets and humans. Are there ways to minimize fleas without resorting to chemical concoctions? And is anything being done to ban these dangerous products from store shelves?*

-- Nancy Trouffant, Lancaster, PA

Americans spend some \$1 billion each year on products designed to combat fleas. Many of these products do their jobs handsomely, but two of the most egregious chemicals widely used in flea collars, tetrachlorvinphos and propoxur, have been shown to cause damage to our brains and nervous systems, and are known human carcinogens. Residues containing these chemicals can stay on a pet's fur—and whatever he or she rubs up against, including your rugs, furniture and children—for weeks on end.

The Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) found that residue levels produced by some flea collars are 1,000 times higher than which the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) considers safe for children to be around. Previous campaigning by NRDC and other nonprofit groups convinced the federal government to ban six other dangerous pesticides formerly common in flea collars, but tetrachlorvinphos and propoxur are still wreaking havoc on the environment and human and pet health.

In light of these dangers, what's a concerned pet owner to do? For starters, ditch the collar and buy a flea comb. NRDC reports on its GreenPaws.org website that regular combing of a pet can help reduce fleas while allowing owners to monitor the extent of a given flea problem. Fleas caught in the comb should be drowned in soapy water. Also, vacuum frequently to rid your carpets, floors and crevices of fleas and their eggs. Dispose of any used vacuum bags immediately so fleas don't escape and re-infest the room.

In the case of an extreme infestation, a professional steam carpet cleaning might be your best bet. As for your pet, frequent soapy baths are a great way to control fleas. Pet bedding should also be washed weekly in hot water. Outside of the house—where your pet romps and frolics—keep your grass and shrubbery clipped short to increase dryness and sunlight, which

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inhibits fleas. Nematodes—all-natural non-chemical biological agents available at most garden stores—will get rid of fleas in problem areas outdoors.

Of course, all this diligent work might still not be enough to keep fleas at bay, so you may need to turn to products formulated with essential oils that repel insects but do not harm pets or people. Be sure to start with small doses and monitor pets and family for allergic responses. Another non-pesticide option is S-Methoprene, a so-called Insect Growth Regulator which halts the growth of chitin, the substance that creates an insect's exoskeleton, and won't harm humans or pets. S-Methoprene is best used as a tool in preventing an extended infestation since adult insects are unaffected by it.

With the federal government apparently uninterested in banning tetrachlorvinphos and propoxur from flea products, NRDC is taking the issue straight to the people. Via its GreenPaws.org website, users can customize a letter to PETCO and PetSmart, the nation's two largest pet supply retailers, asking them to stop selling products containing such dangerous chemicals. And whether or not these companies will heed the call may well depend on consumer behavior, so the more you buy safer alternatives, the better.

CONTACTS:

UNFCCC, www.unfccc.int;
Worldwatch Institute, www.worldwatch.org .

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P.O. Box 5098, Westport, CT 06881;

earthtalk@emagazine.com.

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