

With rising temperatures and after a spring with plenty of rainfall, flea and tick season has already started in Kansas.

According to [Susan Nelson](#), veterinarian and clinical associate professor at Kansas State University's [Veterinary Health Center](#), it is time for pet owners to protect pets from fleas and ticks if they have not already started to do so.

While fleas can be pests year-round, the largest numbers occur in late summer and fall. Ticks also are encountered almost year-round in Kansas, with the highest intensity in late spring and early summer and only a brief two to three-month reprieve during the colder winter months, Nelson said.

Fleas can cause a host of health issues for dogs or cats, including painful skin infections, anemia and tapeworm infestations. Fleas also are the carrier of the organisms that cause cat scratch fever and bubonic plague, both of which can be transmitted to cats and people.

"Even though fleas prefer to feed on pets, people are not immune from receiving their irritating and sometimes disease-spreading bites," Nelson said.

Ticks can cause such diseases as tularemia, Rocky Mountain spotted fever, ehrlichiosis and Lyme disease in dogs, and all four diseases are transmissible to humans from the bite of a tick, Nelson said. Like fleas, ticks are equal opportunity feeders on both pets and people.

The best way to combat these pests is to stop them before an infestation occurs. Nelson said year-round prevention is recommended to reduce chance of this occurring. Numerous products are available for dogs and cats, but more prevention methods are available for dogs than for cats.

Options for both dogs and cats include topical treatments, preventative collars and ingestible products, Nelson said. Some topical treatments are for fleas or ticks only, while others are labeled for both pests and also deworm for several intestinal parasites and heartworms. Several topical treatments for dogs also have repelling properties, which help in warding off chiggers, flies and mosquitoes. Most topicals are both safe and effective, but there are some downsides:

- The treatment can wash off when a dog goes swimming or bathes.
- While they are still wet, topical treatments can be transferred to people who pet the dog.

"If you have children around and don't like the thought of them petting a dog where topical treatments have been applied, then the new oral pills are a good product to select," Nelson said. "They do cost a little more than some of the traditional topical treatments, but they are an option."

Nelson recommends either topical treatments or the newer collars and ingestible products. She does not advise using shampoos that claim to prevent fleas and ticks because they have a limited duration of efficacy. Most of the older, traditional ingredient-based flea collars and powders are also not very effective.

Cats in Riley, Pottawatomie and Geary counties, as well as many other parts of Kansas, are especially at risk for cytauxzoonosis, a highly fatal tick-borne disease. While some cat owners may think keeping their felines inside is a perfect solution to keeping them safe from this disease, Nelson said it is not always that simple.

"If you have a dog and a cat, and your dog is going indoors and outdoors but your cat is only indoors, you should treat your cat because your dog can bring parasites inside that haven't had enough time on the dog for a product to work and kill them," Nelson said. "The parasites can come off your dog and infest your cat. Additionally, these pests can hitch a ride on your clothing, so indoor cats are still at risk."

Fewer flea and tick preventative options are available for cats than for dogs. Products with fipronil as the active ingredient help to kill ticks, but they have no repelling activity. Nelson highly recommends using newer flea and tick collars with repelling activity alone or concurrently with using a fipronil-based product on cats that are at high risk for exposure.

Nelson advises never using a dog-specific flea or tick preventative on a cat because those products are potentially fatal to cats.

For homes with either dogs or cats, Nelson recommends keeping lawns mowed short, shrubs trimmed and debris raked away from shrubs and foundations because fleas prefer shaded environments with organic debris, such as rotting leaves. Ticks prefer shaded areas containing tall grasses and shrubs.

Regardless of home environment, other factors including the pet's age, pregnancy status, frequency of bathing or swimming, and level of contact with the outdoors may affect the selection process for the best treatment.

"A cat or dog that never leaves the house may use a different product than a dog that goes hiking with you, or a cat that lives with a dog that goes hiking," Nelson said. "The best thing to do is to talk to your veterinarian and see what choice is best for your pet."

For more information on this or other topics please contact the Marais des Cygnes Extension District Mound City office at 913-795-2829 or the Paola office at 913-294-4306.