



# The CAT Clinic Catalyst

329 Penshurst St.  
Willoughby NSW  
2068

East Chatswood Cat Clinic Ph: 9417 6613 November 2002

## Can a Flea kill a Cat?

Fleas are mainly considered to have nuisance value, but in fact, they can kill a cat. Some of the diseases caused by fleas have been due to an extremely strong, or somewhat unusual immune reaction from some cats while others are due to parasites within the flea infecting the cat's blood when the flea feeds. However, now that there are extremely safe and effective flea control products around, a few of the deadly or difficult diseases caused by fleas are hardly seen any more.

Two of the last 20 years most common problems *feline millitary dermatitis* or scabby cat and *feline endocrine alopecia* and *psychogenic alopecia* or bald cat, have all but disappeared since their management with perfect flea control. While in the past we fiddled with hormones and sedatives, the cats were really just itchy!

A flea bite will have the cat still itching in three days! Cats don't scratch when they itch like humans and dogs, they lick and pull out their fur. Intensive application of the newer flea killers (Frontline, Advantage, Revolution) means that cats can stop shaving themselves because the itch will stop when the fleas have gone!

The main problems where fleas are vectors (or carriers) of disease are *feline anaemia* (due to *Haemobartonella felis*) and cat scratch disease (due to *Bartonella henselae*). While the role of the flea in the transmission of these problems is far from clear, it is pretty certain that fleas can contribute to the spread of these diseases in colonies of cats.

Many skin diseases become manageable once the flea allergy component is removed. The large, wet, raised patches some cats get on their thighs, neck and down their back, collectively called *eosinophilic granuloma complex* (and complex it is!) are now treated in the first instance by eradicating fleas from the cat's environment. Dermatologists even talk about skin diagnoses before and after Frontline (because it was the first effective flea treatment to be available to cat owners). If the lesions

do not disappear after the removal of fleas, then other allergy-based problems are investigated. Sometimes, the cat's allergic immune response is so extreme, it can cause biopsies of the lesions to mimic cancers such as *Cutaneous Lymphoma*. While not all of these conditions are allergy-based, it is often worth a try to see if it is fleas which are the component making the cat unmanageable medically.

The cat's ability to catch and swallow fleas can also cause some problems for the front end of the cat. Lesions such as rodent ulcer (which inflames and eats away the upper lip), and *eosinophilic lesions* on the back of the tongue can be



reduced with 'perfect' flea control. An interesting lesion in the mouth that can kill a cat through haemorrhage is the *palatine ulcer* on the roof of a cat's mouth. It is caused by constant licking, with the barbs of the tongue plus the flea saliva irritating the tissue and causing an erosion into an artery there. The cat usually swallows the blood, so the owner does not see how much trouble the cat is in until the blood loss makes them weak and lethargic through anaemia. Urgent treatment is required (sometimes including a blood transfusion) to reverse and stabilise the situation. Thereafter, once again, fleas have to be eradicated from the environment as part of the management of the problem.

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## news & views

Feral cats (or rather, their demise) is in the news again. There is a newcat bait which is effective and relatively humane. It is a drug derived from *paracetamol* (the pain relief drug), which in low doses uniquely kills cats. Since it only affects cats, native species are entirely safe. It will only be used in remote or carefully targeted areas, so household cats will be safe too. The product will only be released under licence, so no cat haters will get their hands on it. We welcome the distinction, at last, between the feral cat, which is a problem, and the household cat which is a pleasure.

# Cat Trivia



- 1 Why, according to legend, do tabby cats have an 'M' on their foreheads?
- 2 What is the derivation of 'tabby' cat?
- 3 Why was Charles Dicken's cat's name changed?
- 4 What was the name of the kitten kept by Dickens?
5. What was party trick for which Charles Dicken's cat was known?
- 6 What was the fine for killing a cat in ancient Egypt?
- 7 What was the fine for killing a cat in Saxony in the 9th Century?
- 8 What was the name of Matthew Flinders cat?
- 9 Where did Matthew Flinders cat die?
- 10 How much reward was offered when Matthew Flinders cat went missing?

## Answers

1. Because the Prophet Mohammed laid his hand on his favourite cat's head.  
 2. The phrase comes from Attabiya in Baghdad where watered 'tabby silk' is found.  
 3. William became William after producing kittens.  
 4. The Master's cat.  
 5. Putting out the candle with his paw to send Dickens to bed.  
 6. Death.  
 7. Sixty bushels of corn.  
 8. Trim.  
 9. The Isle of France.  
 10. Ten Spanish dollars.

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## Can a Flea kill a Cat?

The other, almost incidental, problem involving fleas is the transmission of the flea tapeworm (*Dipylidium caninum*). These creatures are released into the cat's gut after it crunches a flea, and grows to produced little egg-filled segments of worm which emerge from the anus - usually when the owner has guests and the cat is being a tart with her tail high in the air presenting her bottom to all and sundry! While the segments are, in general, harmless, cats can occasionally get intestinal blockages and irritations if there are enough flea tapeworms in their system. However, the biggest problem is social - no one likes to see the little wrigglers (they look like moving cucumber seeds!), or the

rice grains they become around the cat's backside once they have dehydrated. By the way, humans can only get the worms if they eat the flea, so they are not dangerous, just unsightly!

Kittens are particularly susceptible to fleas. I have seen kittens, and even an occasional adult cat (especially flat faced persians) die from anaemia after being sucked dry of their blood from an infestation of hundreds of fleas.

As a vet, I find it much easier to help cats now that flea-related problems can be managed - I don't miss these 'difficult diseases' of the past at all!

What is 'perfect flea control'? Well, it is expensive, but it is possible. And will be the topic of another article in the next edition!

# XMAS BOARDING IS FULL!

If you are planning to go away over the Xmas break – **PLEASE PHONE US NOW 9417 6613** so we can help you make suitable arrangements. All the good catteries are always fully booked by October, including the Cat's Pyjamas. However, there are other solutions, so give us a call and see what can be organised for your cats over the holidays!

## CAT ART for Xmas Presents!

Dr. Kim has been on the hunt again and has found lots of fun 'Cat Stuff' - both for your cat and for decorations. Stop in and have a look at the new range of mugs, photoframes and toys!

If undelivered please return to East Chatswood Cat Clinic  
 329 Penshurst St, Willoughby 2068

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New CAT ART available  
 for Xmas