

Flea and tick treatments for cats and dogs. July 2022

Several significant pieces of research, most notably that published in February 2021 by the University of Sussex, indicate the possibility that two neurotoxic pesticides commonly used in veterinary flea products are readily detectable in rivers and other waterways. Researchers found widespread contamination of rivers with both fipronil and the neonicotinoid, imidacloprid: the concentrations found often far exceeded accepted safe limits.

Many organizations associated with the protection and preservation of our flora and fauna have voiced alarm at these findings. The Dragonfly Society, for example, issued a cautionary statement: 'The impacts these chemicals could be having on riverine invertebrates, including dragonflies, and their predators is truly disturbing. The main pathway for these pesticides into our waterways is believed to be through waste water from people's homes moving through sewers into local rivers. However, direct transfer from animals accessing the rivers is also noted as a significant pathway.'

An article in the Vet Times, understandably pointed out that 'There are other factors that must be noted when considering the recent paper.' Among these, use as biocides and in greenhouses 'are other possible explanations for the higher frequency of detection near sewage treatment plants', while 'actual evidence of environmental damage being caused by veterinary medicines in these rivers has not been demonstrated.' Yet, the article conceded, 'Though only a few drops are applied to individual animals each month, they are toxic to aquatic invertebrates at extremely low (parts per trillion) levels. As a profession, we need to be more mindful of the environmental impact from large scale, indiscriminate pesticide use across millions of animals.'

And I think that's where we, as pet owners, come in. It seems to me that we should only be using flea and tick treatment when absolutely necessary: indiscriminate use is not beneficial for our pets or other creatures. I know that many of us have pet plans which promote monthly application of these treatments throughout the year. Vet surgeries often display advertising posters and leaflets from the manufacturers which extol the virtues of routine use. It is very easy to buy the treatments in pet shops and from supermarkets. Rough estimates of pet numbers in the UK vary widely: it's suggested that there are between 8.5 and 12.5 million dogs and roughly the same number of cats. If a significant proportion of owners are dosing their animals, whether or not there is demonstrable need, on a routine basis, we may be inadvertently contributing to the build up of a toxic environment for those vertebrates and invertebrates which live in and alongside rivers, ponds and other areas of water.

Please think carefully before you reach for the flea or tick treatment and please avoid using it routinely. Though insecticide treatment may occasionally be essential for established or chronic infestation, fleas or ticks can be managed effectively by use of a flea comb or, for ticks, with tweezers or a special removal tool.

We all recognise the marvellous benefits we receive from our companion animals. They bring us joy, encourage us to exercise, keep us company, and bestow their affection, unstintingly, upon us. They live as part of our family and we would not wish to be without them. But I think we would all wish to avoid a situation where, in caring for them, we become care less of other animal life.



References

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Dedicated to the memory of Audrey the tortoiseshell cat 2004 – 2022