

OTC Flea Remedies Gaining Ground

Misuse is the major cause of bad reactions; educate your customers.

By **Ron Bast**
Special to Pet Product News

The television images are horrifying: kittens writhing in pain while the announcer's voice blames a topical flea and tick treatment for the problem. Some broadcasts blame over-the-counter treatments while others blast the entire segment and point fingers at the government agencies responsible for regulating the safety of chemicals and poisons.

Similar stories appear periodically in newspapers, magazines and on Internet sites around the world. The net effect for many consumers may be a growing concern about the safety of today's flea and tick products, but through it all, pet owners continue to seek flea and tick remedies in increasing numbers.

It may be the large number of flea and tick treatments administered across the country every year that drives the occasional horror story.

According to the 2003-2004 American Pet Product Manufacturing Association Pet Owner Survey, more than half of all dog owners and 40 percent of cat owners bought some type of flea and tick treatment for their more than 68 million animals in 2002.

Sales Remain Strong

Topical treatments continued to dominate the 2002 market, accounting for 65 percent of all purchases. Veterinary-channel topical products continue to perform strongly, but over-the-counter remedies have made significant inroads into the segment as cost becomes more important in purchase decisions.

The survey indicates that more veterinary visits per year translate to more flea and tick treatments, but a significant amount of product comes from over the counter rather than from veterinarian.

A number of vet-only products continue to find their way into the over-the-counter market through international purchases and what some vet-channel watchers call a "gray market," but no official plans to embrace the over-the-counter market have been announced by manufacturers of vet-channel



The flea- and tick-product market is constantly formulating new, safer, and more convenient products to keep consumers' pets from itching and scratching. Sales show that topical treatments are dominating the market.

nel products.

OTC products had a significant public-relations boost in July 2003 with the publication of an article in Consumer Reports Magazine recommending OTC flea and tick preparations as a safe and effective way to save money on pet and veterinary expenses. The article compared efficacy and cost of both OTC and vet-channel products.

Oral treatment sales remained essentially flat, accounting for 19 percent of purchases for dogs and five percent for cats in 2002, little changed from 2000.

Oral Treatments

Darrell Klug, senior product manager at Novartis, said the explosive growth in the oral treatment sector has softened but still remains strong.

"We no longer have the tremendous growth we saw in the '90s," Klug said. "The market has moved from high growth in the vet channel to a proliferation of brands today, but we expect relatively strong growth to continue."

Recently introduced oral products have done well, Klug said, adding that the oral delivery system has been well received by the public for its simplicity and efficacy.

"Veterinarians tell us, when people try it one time they're hooked."

Use of shampoos, collars and sprays continues to decline as the popularity of topical treatments increases, but more than 50 percent of pet owners who buy flea and tick products still purchase these items.

A smaller number also purchase indoor and outdoor-area treatment products.

Those trends appeared to continue in 2003, adding up to a lot of flea and tick treatments, said Albert Ahn, D.V.M. and vice president of consumer relations at Hartz Mountain Corp. in Secaucus, N.J.

"It was a robust season that started early and kept on going in spite of some early snow," Dr. Ahn said.

"It was highlighted by the state of Colorado seeing an especially bad bout of West Nile virus, which is transmitted by the mosquito, but it made people more aware of the strong and aggressive season of creepy crawly things. The strength of sales in both the veterinarian and OTC channels has been very strong."

Mark Newberg, director of corporate affairs for Wellmark International's Zodiac Pet Protection in Schaumburg, Ill., agreed.

Pendulum Swings

"It was a pretty decent season," he said. "Everyone's been up to their hip waders in

whatever channel they're in, but the pendulum swings back and forth between the channels.

"We've been watching a subtle shift to the mass market and out of grocery, and people are beginning to go back to the pet specialty stores to get better service."

Newberg also sees a strong demand for indoor flea and tick products in spite of the dominance of topicals.

"Many customers still turn to the indoor products because they're not tolerant enough of fleas to wait for the topicals to work. Even though the topicals are the latest and the greatest, a lot of people still go to the indoor products for the quickest results."

That desire for quick results keeps manufacturers cranking out new products aimed at stopping bugs in their tracks. Sharon Collins, marketing manager of Phoenix-based Farnam Pet Products, says the company plans to release a new flea and tick mist for cats that should compete effectively with the topicals.

More OTC Sales

"We're still seeing a trend toward topical use," she said. "But also that people who have been getting them from their vet are now finding comparable products over the counter, so

we're seeing more OTC sales. There's a lot of growth in the entire segment, and we expect that to continue."

Collins credits at least some of that growth to the outbreak, and subsequent news coverage, of the West Nile virus.

"We're seeing a lot of concern over the virus," Collins said. "That's having an impact on sales of products that go after mosquitoes. The virus isn't a big problem for dogs, but because it's had such a big play in the news, people are figuring it's better to be safe than sorry."

Safety issues drive a significant amount of flea- and tick-product sales—safety from diseases caused by the pests tops the list, but safety of the product itself ranks high on pet owners' list of reasons to buy.

The APPMA survey lists general safety concerns as the second most important factor when cat owners select a flea and tick product, right behind effectiveness.

Veterinarian recommendation ranked third, but that figure dropped from a high of 28 percent of those surveyed in 2000 to just 20 percent in 2002. At the same time, price concerns almost doubled in importance, a factor that helps explain the shift toward OTC products.

As safety concerns about the products themselves grow, manufacturers are moving to increase safety margins without harming efficacy.

The search for kinder, gentler products led Stamford, Conn.-based Natural Chemistry to create a product gentle enough for use on kittens and safe enough to use around children.

"People are becoming more concerned about the safety issues involved with flea and tick treatments," said Vincent Hourihan, vice president of Natural Chemistry.

"It's becoming important to provide products that won't pyramid with other products to create problems. One approach is to treat the parasite instead of the pet, and that's the direction we're

taking.”

Another approach to increase safety lies with the retailer. As flea and tick treatment becomes more popular the opportunity for mistakes and screaming headlines grows as well.

Large Sales, Large Responsibilities

“The usage pattern has risen and so have the incidents of adverse reactions associated with the products,” Ahn said. “The incidents are rare, but I don’t care who you talk to, even one incident is one incident too many.”

Most problems occur because pet owners don’t follow product instructions carefully, Ahn said.

“These are poisons,” he said. “They must be used properly.”

A recent study by the Environmental Protection Agency

More Is Not Better

“One of the biggest traps is the one that says if a little is good a lot is better,” Ahn said. “All you

It’s important for pet owners to watch their animals closely for the first few hours after applying any flea and tick product.

can eat for \$5.99 might work for Sizzler, but it doesn’t work here.”

That’s why Ahn and others associated with the flea and tick segment spend a lot of time talking about the need to educate consumers about the proper use of any chemical on an animal.

“Education, education, education,” Collins said. “Read the labels. Everyone’s doing things in the packaging to keep the dog and cat products separate, but most problems we see where an animal gets a major reaction is from misuse.

“We need to continue to edu-

specific type of pet in the store with its owner, they need to reconcile the purchases with that type of pet.

“And retailers need to reinforce the fact that flea and tick products are regulated products, and they must follow the label directions.”

It’s important for pet owners to watch their animals closely for the first few hours after applying any flea and tick product, Ahn said.

“With topical products, typically any reaction will occur in the first few hours after application,” he said.

“You may see some localized skin irritation or hair loss. If anything you see in that first few hours worries you, call your vet.

“The overwhelming majority of animals will be fine. A very small number will see a reac-

Fighting the Good Fight

- Know the flea and tick situation in your area of influence and stock accordingly. Customers in high-infestation areas need more weapons, including indoor and outdoor area sprays, to beat down the worst infestations.

- Know your customer. Watch for customers who own cats but want to buy flea and tick products for dogs. Quiz customers about the size, age and health of their animals, and check to make sure the products they buy match those requirements.

- Know your products. Knowledgeable staff people can make a real dent in the horror stories surrounding flea and tick products by informing customers about the products before they buy. Emphasize the need to read and follow label instructions as though the life of the pet depends upon it, because it does.

—R.B.

market today work very well, Jones said.

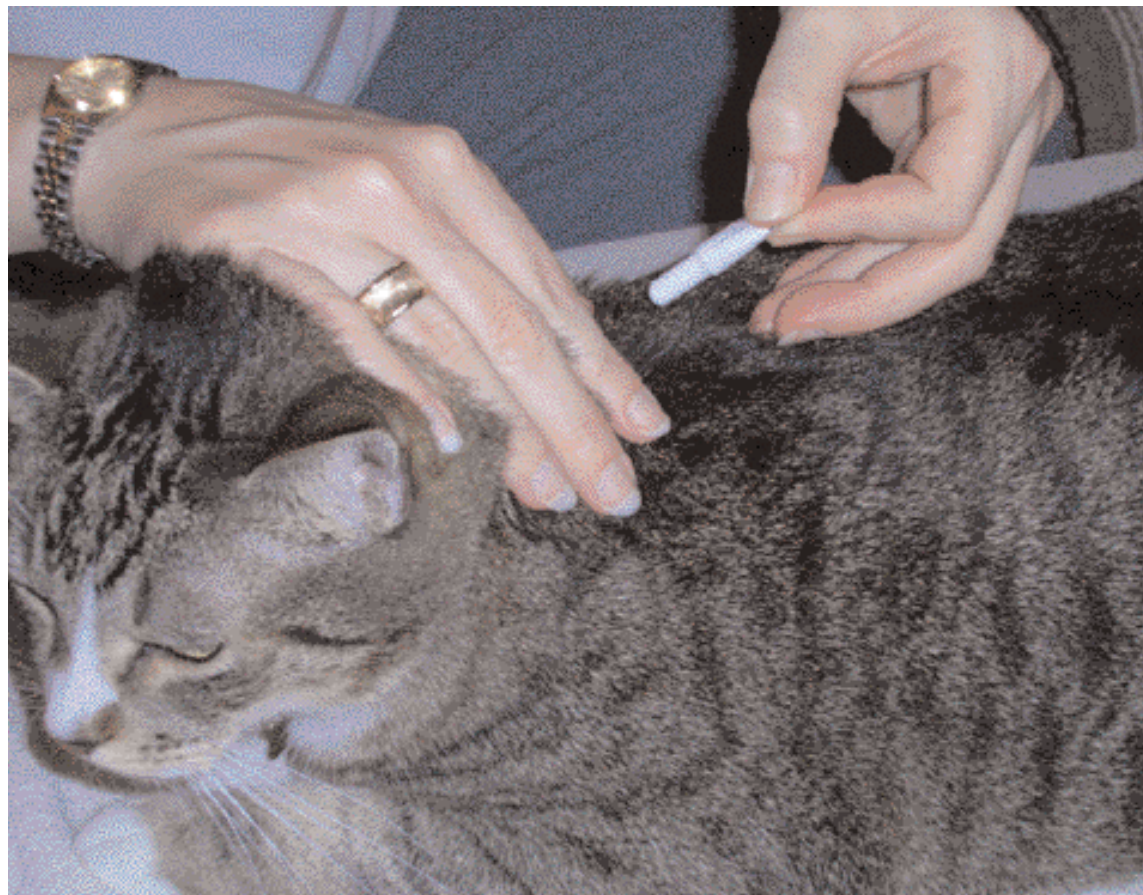
“We hear very few complaints, and a lot of good comments,” he said. “This area is flea heaven, so we sell a lot of shampoos, sprays and topicals.”

The complaints are few and far between, Ahn said, because the products work.

“It wasn’t that long ago that flea allergy dermatitis was the No. 1 skin ailment we saw in pets, but now it’s been practically effaced from the clinical jargon,” he said. “It’s very rare to see it now.

“It’s amazing to see what’s happened in such a short time.”

Ron Bast is a free-lance writer in Santa Margarita, Calif., and a frequent contributor to Pet Product News.



Over-the-counter topical products seem to be competing well in the flea and tick market with those available through veterinarians. Consumers demand for veterinary-only products fell from 28 percent in 2000 to 20 percent in 2002.

examining hundreds of fatal and serious injuries to animals linked to flea and tick medications seems to agree.

One section of the study found that more than 90 percent of reported incidents involving a permethrin-based topical treatment formulated for dogs-only were cats that were “accidentally or intentionally exposed to the product.”

Permethrin toxicity, deadly to cats, plays a role in a majority of the horror stories. Other factors include overdosing animals either by overestimating the animal’s weight or simply because many people think more is better.

cate our customers to the safety issues involved in these products.”

Every animal is different, Collins said.

“Topical treatments come in different sizes for different weight animals. Make sure the customer is using the proper product for the size of their animal.”

The Retailer’s Role

Keeping an intelligent eye on what the customer buys is part of the job, Ahn said.

“Pet store employees usually don’t have a veterinarian standing in the aisles telling them what to do.

“It’s up to the employee to pay close attention. If they see a

tion, and that is usually a mild reaction.”

If an animal reacts to a product, it should be bathed in cool water with shampoo, suggested Evan Jones, customer service representative at Lemos Feed & Pet Supply of Atascadero, Calif.

“But don’t squirt the shampoo directly on the animal. Squirt it into a pail of water to dilute it first. Concentrated shampoo on the skin creates most of the itching problems we see in animals.”

Paying Attention Pays Off

With a little care and attention, the flea products on the