

MOSQUITOES be GONE!

These pests aren't just annoying – they can also make your dog or cat sick. Get a head start on the season by learning how to control them without harsh chemicals.

BY STEPHANIE SMITH, PHD

Few things are more irritating than the whine of a mosquito around your head. These insects are more than annoying, however. They can carry serious, even deadly, parasites and diseases that can affect your animal companions as well as your human family.

Mosquitoes are a fact of life in many regions, once the warmer weather arrives. But controlling these pests doesn't have to involve an arsenal of toxic chemicals. There are safe and relatively simple ways to reduce mosquitoes and protect your animals without spreading poisons around.

THE PROBLEM

Mosquitoes are responsible for a number of diseases in North America, including West Nile virus and heartworm. The most pressing concern for dogs and cats is heartworm. While dogs have been reported to contract West Nile virus, horses are the main victims.

The best way to treat the health problems caused by mosquitoes is to prevent them in the first place. To do that, you need to understand the mosquito's life cycle.

KNOW THY ENEMY

Like most insects, mosquitoes come from eggs. The female lays her eggs in clusters on the surface of still water. The eggs form a raft that you can see if you examine the water closely. The eggs hatch into wigglers that look like animated drinking straws as they hang head down in the water. Some wigglers are predators, preying on small fish or crustaceans, but most eat plankton.

The pupal stage is where the wiggler becomes a mosquito. Adult males are nectar feeders, but female mosquitoes must have a blood meal to produce their eggs. Mosquitoes rest in dark, shaded vegetation during the day and come out in the evening to feed through the night. They are most active at dusk and dawn.

PREVENTION TACTICS

Prevention can be broken down into three areas:

- 1 *Reduce mosquito habitat.*
Without water, there can be no mosquitoes. Empty all containers holding water except for any outdoor water bowls for your dog or cat – and make sure

these are refreshed on a daily basis. Mosquito dunks, which contain *Bacillus thuringiensis israelensis*, can be put in your bird bath without harming the birds and other wildlife that drink from it. The bacteria produce a toxin specific to mosquito larvae.

The common mosquito-borne illnesses, especially West Nile virus, normally live in birds, especially crows and grackles. For some reason, crows are especially susceptible to West Nile virus and mosquitoes that bite them can spread it to your dog, cat or even you. Discourage them from nesting near your house. Bird feeders should also be kept at a distance from the house, away from your animals. Any spilled birdseed should be cleaned up promptly to avoid attracting rodents that may provide secondary hosts for mosquitoes and their diseases.

2 *Avoid mosquitoes.*

Keep your dog or cat in at night and at dawn and dusk, when mosquitoes are most active. All open windows and doors should have screens to keep mosquitoes out of the house. Leave outdoor

Do not use human insect repellent on your dog or cat. Use a non-toxic product formulated specifically for companion animals.

lights off unless absolutely necessary – they attract insects, including mosquitoes.

3 *Investigate animal-specific preventatives.*

Your veterinarian is the best source of information on the animal-specific prevention of heartworm and West Nile virus in your area. You will need to weigh the costs and benefits of vaccinating or providing preventive medication for the diseases common in your area.

By implementing some relatively easy strategies, you can protect everyone in your household, animal or human, from the annoyance and danger mosquitoes pose. 🐾

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