What is the best course of treatment for lice on kittens?

Lice are but one of many ectoparasites that can infect cats. Dr. Ellis discusses treatment options and how to properly protect other animals in a shelter or in a foster family.

Question:

Good day,

I volunteer for a rescue group and we have cats and kittens that come in from every walk of life. Lately we have had a run on lice in a couple groups. This was diagnosed by the veterinarian that we had taken them to for their FIV-FeLV testing and their first vaccine. Would you be able to give us any suggestions on a good treatment that will get rid of these miserable little insects?

We have used Frontline and that was applied 10 days ago but does not seem to have touched them.

Secondly, should the foster mom be changing clothes and shoes when she comes out of the room? Anything that she should be doing or not doing? Does she have to be concerned about her own cats even though they do not get into the room where the kittens are?

We sure would appreciate any help that we can get.

Answer:

Thank you for your question. Hopefully I will be able to give you tools to help out!

Lice are common cat parasites that will usually respond very well to treatment. However, treatment options that are currently available will not kill any eggs previously laid and so it is important to repeat treatment at closer intervals than usual. Common flea medications such as Revolution® (selamectin) and Frontline® (fipronil) are effective against lice. Treatment should be repeated every 2 weeks for at least 4
treatments. In some cases however, weekly treatments can be indicated. I do recommend checking with your veterinarian to make sure the kittens are old enough to safely receive these treatments.

Another topical treatment option is to bathe the animals in a lime-sulfur dip every 2 weeks for a total of 3 treatments. Same as with the previous options, lime-sulfur does not affect eggs but it is however safe to use at all ages. It is important to note that kittens have trouble regulating their body temperature, and so it is of utmost importance to make sure they stay warm until they are completely dry. Additionally, if any cat is severely matted, I would recommend shaving them in order to maximize treatment efficiency.

Luckily, lice are species-specific and so these lice will not infect humans or dogs. Most of the infections will arise from direct contact with an infected animal, but we can act as fomites and cause an indirect infection. Therefore, we recommend that every resident cat in a foster household receive monthly flea control medication.

Additional precautions include cleaning or throwing out the bedding that the foster cats are using and washing your hands after handling them. Changing clothes after handling will not harm, but should not be necessary if the resident cats receive their monthly treatments. Any brushes, collars, clippers or other accessories should also be cleaned after use. Additional environmental decontamination should not be necessary except in cases of severe infestation.

For more information, the Companion Animal Parasite Council (CAPC) is a great resource for veterinary parasitology recommendations. CAPC’s lice guidelines can be found here: https://www.capcvet.org/guidelines/lice/

I hope that answers all of your questions and best of luck going forward!

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