

# Ask EcoGirl

By Patricia Dines

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## Pet Care Without Toxics

**Dear EcoGirl:** I love my pets. How can I protect them from fleas and ticks without using toxic materials? *Signed, Pet Lover*

**Dear Pet Lover:** Thank you for your great question. Yes, folks will often grab mainstream pet care products without realizing that these can be toxic, thus potentially harming both their pets and themselves.

Products such as pet collars, sprays, shampoos, dips, and dusts can contain neurotoxic pesticides that harm the neurological systems of animals and humans, even in small amounts. Studies have linked these chemicals to a wide variety of health problems, from tremors and hyperactivity to cancer and neurological disease.

Children are especially vulnerable, because their systems are still developing and they interact closely with pets. Additionally, it's estimated that hundreds, even thousands, of pets have been injured by pet care products.

Remember, just because a product's for sale doesn't mean it's safe, even when used as directed.

### To Protect Your Family

Here are some ways that you can help keep your family safe:

- **Understand the risks of the pet products you're using or considering.** Read labels carefully, and take warnings seriously. Especially avoid products with the keywords "Danger" or "Warning," and don't use flea collars with TCVP, propoxur, or carbaryl. For brand name specifics, go to [www.greenpaws.org](http://www.greenpaws.org) and click on "Product Guide." Also, see the EPA's concerns about Frontline and Advantage at [www.thedailygreen.com/environmental-news/latest/is-frontline-safe-0318](http://www.thedailygreen.com/environmental-news/latest/is-frontline-safe-0318).

- **Phase out your use of toxic pet products.** First eliminate organophosphates and carbamates, particularly around people or animals who are pregnant, young, ill, or elderly. Never

allow children to apply toxic products on pets.

- **For emergency help with a pet or human poisoning,** call the National Poison Help Line at (800) 222-1222. **Also report the incident** to the EPA's National Pesticide Telecommunications Network at (800) 858-7378 or [www.npic.orst.edu](http://www.npic.orst.edu).

- **Dispose of toxics properly.** For more information, see [www.recyclenow.org](http://www.recyclenow.org) or call (707) 565-3375.

- **Encourage stores to stop carrying the most toxic products.** For an easy action, see [www.greenpaws.org](http://www.greenpaws.org).

### Less-Toxic Approaches

Luckily, there are less-toxic ways to care for your pets. For example:

- **Physical measures.** You can often control fleas by bathing, brushing, and combing your pet. Use a gentle non-toxic flea shampoo and a flea comb.

- **Vinegar.** After bathing, rinse your pet with diluted apple cider vinegar; fleas don't like the smell. (Test a small amount first to get the right dilution level.) You can also add a tablespoon of apple cider vinegar to your dog's water bowl.

- **Protective nutrition.** Healthy pets are more able to repel bugs. Feed them natural pet food and consider adding immunity boosters to their meals, including brewer's yeast (1/2 teaspoon), grated garlic (dogs only, 1 clove per 30 pounds), safflower oil (1 tsp), or powdered seaweed (1 tsp).

- **Essential oils.** Buy natural essential oils (not synthetic), and put a few drops on your pet's collar. Good options include: lavender (repels mosquitoes, ticks, and fleas), peppermint (mosquitoes), lemongrass (ticks), and citronella (fleas, dogs only). Also consider lemon, cedar, eucalyptus, and neem. You can make combinations, such as blending equal parts of

rosemary, thyme, lemon, citronella, and tea tree oil.

- **Carpet and furniture treatments.** Establish a regular pet sleeping area, and launder pet bedding in hot water every couple of weeks. Vacuum regularly in areas that pets frequent; immediately discard the vacuum bag to eliminate flea eggs. To deter fleas, flies, and ants, combine two cups of natural diatomaceous earth (not the pool product) with one cup each of baking soda and cornstarch. Sprinkle on carpets and furniture, let sit for 1 to 2 hours, then vacuum. (Consider steam-cleaning beforehand.) Flea Busters also offers a low-toxicity home treatment using a boron-based salt. [www.fleabusters.com](http://www.fleabusters.com), (800) 6NO-FLEA.

- **Yard care.** Mow often in areas that pets frequent. Consider getting beneficial nematodes, which are non-toxic and feed on flea larvae. They're available locally at Harmony Farm Supply, (707) 823-9125, [www.harmonyfarm.com](http://www.harmonyfarm.com).

**For more pet care information and ideas,** see *Home Safe Home*, by Debra Lynn Dadd, and [www.care2.com](http://www.care2.com) (then do a search, say for "cat fleas"). You can also find natural products and books at health food stores and online.

*Ask EcoGirl is written by Patricia Dines, Author of [The Organic Guides](#), and Editor and Lead Writer for [The Next STEP](#) newsletter. Email your questions about going green to [EcoGirl@AskEcoGirl.info](mailto:EcoGirl@AskEcoGirl.info) for possible inclusion in future columns. Also see "Ask EcoGirl" on Facebook! And contact EcoGirl for information about carrying this syndicated column in your periodical.*

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