

The medical clinician is supposed to base diagnostic and therapeutic decisions on scientifically established facts about physiology and medicine. From time to time I run into animal related beliefs or ideas that don't always meet these criteria. These concepts are sometimes so lacking in scientific support they qualify as "myths". This month's column will review some of the more common myths I come across in my practice.

Myth # 1: Only non-neutered cats spray.

This very common belief is really unfair to all the non-neutered male cats out there (not that there should be many non-neutered male cats out there, right?). Spraying is defined simply as urination on vertical surfaces, and can be done by both male and female cats, neutered or otherwise. We feel that neutering can help reduce the incidence of spraying but it's no guarantee. Cats spray in response to social and/or environmental stress so keeping your cat's life as stress free as possible will be your best defense against this unpleasant habit. Anyway, there are lots of other great reasons to neuter your male cat.

Myth # 2: If you don't see fleas on your pet then fleas are not the cause of your pet's itchiness.

Wrong. I would estimate that in at least half of my patients suffering from Flea Allergy Dermatitis I can't find a single flea on the pet. That doesn't deter me though. The fact is most veterinarians diagnose Flea Allergy Dermatitis based on the distribution of itchiness on the pet's body. If your pet is itchy in the back half of the body, especially in the tail-base, groin, and rump areas, the most likely cause is fleas. Keep in mind that this is an allergic reaction so if your pet is unlucky enough to be flea allergic, only an occasional fleabite will keep him/her very itchy.

Myth # 3: If you allow your dog to have a litter of pups she will be calmer as an adult.

Dog owners have propagated this myth for generations. Behavior specialists have tried to demonstrate a personality difference between dogs spayed before and after their first litter and have come up empty handed. It appears a dog's personality traits have more to do with genetics and upbringing than maternal experience.

Myth # 4: If you allow your pet to have "just one litter", it will not significantly add to the pet overpopulation problem.

I encounter this sentiment a lot. Most people like their pet so much they want another one, just like him/her. Granted, there will likely be some physical similarities between parent and offspring, but it's more likely the differences will far out number the similarities. And then there's the math. Let's take for example a cat that is allowed to have "just one litter". Using conservative estimates, and assuming her kittens, when mature are also allowed to have "just one litter", and that pattern is continued through each generation, we could end up with over 1000 cats in three short years. Needless to say, "just one litter" is not as benign as it seems on the surface; have your pet spayed or neutered.

Myth # 5: If my dog's nose is cold and wet it must be healthy.

Unfortunately, many things that are unrelated to your pet's health, such as ambient temperature and humidity levels, can affect the temperature and moistness of your dog's nose. If you are wondering about the health status of your pet, ask your veterinarian.

Myth # 6: To remove a tick from a pet you need to hold a lit match near the tick first.

Removing a tick is not that complicated, or potentially dangerous. We recommend using a tweezers, or like instrument, to secure the tick at its head, right at skin level. Pull the tick out with gentle constant traction. No need to twist one-way or the other, just pull it straight out. Never use bare hands.

Myth # 7: If you don't get the entire tick removed, a new one will grow back.

I'm at a loss to say how this myth got started. If any mouth or head parts of a tick are left, the worst we might see is a mild reaction evidenced by redness and swelling at the site. This is usually self-limiting, once the remaining parts dry up and fall off

Myth # 8: Dogs have dog fleas, and cats have cat fleas.

Worldwide there are over 2000 species and subspecies of fleas, but only four are of significance in our pets: the dog flea, the cat flea, the poultry flea, and the human flea. Greater than 90% of fleas found on our pets are the common cat flea (*Ctenocephalides felis*). Don't worry, the human flea called *Pulex irritans*; is not often found on pets.

Myth # 9: Dogs scoot on their rear ends because they have worms.

We've all seen a dog do this. It's not very attractive. Many pet owners conclude their pet must have worms; that's why their back-end itches. In reality scooting is usually caused by anal sac problems such as infection or impaction. Sometimes dogs with severe flea allergy will scoot as well.

Myth # 10: Spaying or neutering your pet will make him/her gain weight.

With rare exception, dogs and cats gain weight because we feed them too much. With changing hormone levels and metabolic rates the spayed or neutered pet may have an increased propensity towards obesity, but that weight gain is completely preventable with appropriate feeding practices. Once they've recovered from the surgery, we advise families to reduce the amount of food they feed their newly altered pet.

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