



Fire Ant Control Around Pets

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The red imported fire ant can be a serious health problem for backyard pets. Fire ants can sting and, occasionally, kill small animals. According to a survey completed by veterinarians, small animals and pets are treated more frequently than any other type of animal for fire ant related health injuries.

Fire ants are commonly attracted to pet food. They can cover a food bowl, making it impossible and dangerous for pets to eat. When mounds are disturbed, thousands of fire ants can rush out to sting the object that invaded the mound, creating a potentially dangerous situation for pets playing, running or digging near a fire ant mound.

Very young animals, caged animals, or those that are old and have difficulty moving, are most likely to be stung. Animals with open sores, bandaged wounds, irritated skin, “hot spots,” or limited mobility from other health problems are more vulnerable and/or attractive to fire ants. Such animals are also more likely to suffer severe reactions when stung because of their weakened state.

Fire ants most readily sting body parts with little or no hair, such as the muzzle, eyes, ears, and the tender skin of the abdomen. If your pet is attacked, remove the animal as quickly as you can from the source of the fire ants. Next, pick the remaining fire ants off your pet by hand. The fire ants will hang onto the skin with their mandibles, and cannot simply be brushed off. Do not attempt to use a water hose to dislodge fire ants from pets as high pressure water will not readily loosen the ants from the animal. Depending on the severity of the attack, treatment by a veterinarian may be necessary.

Management

All pets should be removed from the area to be treated before and during chemical treatment and should remain out of the treated area until the treated area is dry. Read and follow label instructions when applying fire ant control products.

Broadcast treatments, usually baits or granules, can be used to treat the entire yard. Be aware that some broadcast treatments may take days or weeks before results are apparent.

Broadcast baits with low application rates (1-1.5 pounds per acre) are typically applied using a handheld spreader set on the lowest setting while baits applied at higher rates (10 pounds per acre) are applied using a push spreader. Baits should not be allowed to get wet, as they are less attractive to fire ants once they are wet. Fire ants locate bait, pick the bait up and carry it to the mound as food to be shared with other ants within the colony. Common active ingredients for baits include hydramethylnon, fipronil, s-methoprene, pyriproxifen, spinosad, abamectin, indoxacarb and fenoxycarb.

Broadcast granular products are typically applied using a rotary or drop spreader. Granular products need to be watered into the soil so that the product comes into contact with the ants. Common active ingredients for broadcast granules include fipronil, which takes a few weeks to see results, and bifenthrin, which tends to provide visible results more quickly.

Individual mound treatments can be used to get rid of mounds quickly, usually within 24-48 hours. These treatments can be utilized in combination with a broadcast treatment program or as their own stand alone program. Individual mound treatments come in a variety of formulations such as dusts, liquids and granules that often are watered in, as well as baits which are placed around the outside of the mound and not allowed to get wet.

Several “natural” methods of managing fire ants also can be safe to use around your pets. For recently produced mounds, pouring 2 to 3 gallons of boiling water over the mound will usually provide 50% to 60% control. Insecticide products containing pyrethrins (or a combination pyrethrin plus diatomaceous earth or silica dioxide), rotenone, pine oil, or d-limonene, can also provide adequate control of individual fire ant mounds. There is also a “naturally” derived fire ant bait containing the active ingredient spinosad that may be utilized as a broadcast treatment or an individual mound treatment.

When applied properly, broadcast-applied bait products are unlikely to harm pets. This is due to the relatively low toxicity of the insecticides used, the small percentage of active ingredient used in baits, and low application rates. When applied at the recommended rate (usually 1 to 1 ½ pounds per acre), baits should be thoroughly scattered so they are barely visible on the ground, and essentially unavailable to pets. If fire ants are active, baits will be rapidly picked up by worker ants and removed to underground mounds, away from people, birds, and pets.

Despite their relatively low toxicity, caution should always be exercised when applying baits to pet territories. Remove pets during application and take care to sweep up any small piles of spilled bait product. When ingested in large quantities, some baits can be toxic to pets, therefore, store baits properly and in a manner to make them inaccessible to pets. Do not leave visible piles of bait on top of fire ant mounds, as this may tempt some pets to feed on the product.

Dust, granular and liquid insecticides should be thoroughly watered into the mound and allowed to dry before allowing pets nearby. The use of baits as a mound treatment, or use of granular or dust products which are not watered into the soil, may pose a hazard in backyards

with pets, as pesticides may remain on the surface in high concentrations where pets can easily contact them.

For more information regarding fire ant management, see Extension publications [B-6043](#), *Managing Red Imported Fire Ants in Urban Areas*; [B-6099](#), *Broadcast Baits for Fire Ant Control*; or [L-5070](#) *The Texas Two-Step Method Do-It-Yourself Fire Ant Control for Homes and Neighborhoods*. Also visit our web site at <http://fireant.tamu.edu>.

The original version of this document was prepared by Nathan Riggs, formerly Extension Agent-Fire Ant located in San Antonio. The author wishes to thank Molly Keck and Paul Nester for review of this publication.

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