



## CARING FOR YOUR SKUNK

**GENERAL INFORMATION:** Skunks are cat-sized animals distantly related to otters, minks, ferrets and weasels. They are generally friendly with pets and people. The only skunks legal to own come from rabies-free breeder facilities approved by the Department of Agriculture. They are sold already ‘descented’. Various color forms are available, including black and white, brown and white, champagne (reddish) and white, and all white (albino). Skunks tend to be nocturnal but readily adapt to the owner’s schedule. Most are fairly calm in disposition, but occasional animals can be aggressive as adults. Many can be litter box trained. They should be confined when left alone, as they may be prone to destructive behaviors such as digging or chewing on objects in a home. When well socialized a skunk can be an affectionate and rewarding pet.

**SKUNK FACTS:** Life span: 6-10 years. Adult weight: 6-10 lb. Age to adult weight: 6-7 months.

**HANDLING:** Skunks may be picked up around the midsection; never hold them by a leg or tail without supporting the body. With baby skunks you may need to train them to play gently; if the skunk grabs a finger and does not let go, you may flick the tip of the nose sharply with a finger (avoid the eyes!) to get your pet to release. They can be held by the scruff when needed, though with heavy adults the body should be supported under the belly as well.

**HOUSING:** Skunks are usually housed in a spacious wire cage when not supervised; a 5 X 5 foot minimum size is recommended. Cages must be sturdy as skunks chew and claw strongly to attempt escape. Cage bedding can include aspen shavings, fleece, or shredded paper; they may use a litterbox. Adults usually require separate housing to prevent fighting. They often sleep much of the day and awaken when the owner is around. They may be allowed to roam in the house with supervision. Their environment should be free of hazards. Skunks may chew (and swallow) pieces of rubbery items such as rubber toys, ear plugs, shoe soles, rubber mats, etc. These should be kept out of reach. Skunks like to dig in dirt, so potted plants may need to be out of reach. Digging behaviors may also damage carpets so you should observe your pet while not cage confined. Ideally fit your skunk with a collar (or harness) and small bell to help track your pet’s location. A collar also identifies a lost skunk as a pet to anyone who finds it. Slip the collar over the head already buckled to avoid over tightening. Identification may be printed on the collar. A pet microchip inserted under the skin yields permanent identification of your pet.

**DIET:** Skunks are omnivores, eating plant and animal food sources. They are very prone to obesity and need a balanced low fat diet. Dry or canned dog food should be part of the diet. With adults over 6 months old, use only low fat formulas, such as Hills W/D (aim for a fat content of 9% or less). When using a commercial food, no vitamin supplements are needed. A few tartar control kibbles such as Hills T/D for small dogs can be given daily to help keep teeth clean. Vegetables can be fed as 50-75% of the diet; use a nutritional guide to choose veggies with a good calcium/phosphorous ratio. Leafy greens are generally calcium rich; fruits are not and should be minimized. A few exceptions are papaya, raspberries, blackberries, grapes, apples, and mango which may be used in a mixed diet. Hardboiled eggwhites (may include the shell for calcium) minus the fatty yolks may be given *occasionally*, as well as nonfat yogurt, low fat cheese, and earthworms. Avoid mealworms, waxworms and superworms as they are fatty and lack calcium. In general, avoid high calorie items such as nuts, cheese, meat, avocado, grains, cereals, etc. as they may cause obesity, and minimize sweet treats or milk products. Adult skunks should not have food constantly available, but should be fed small portions twice daily. Provide fresh water at all times; use a water bottle or very heavy bowl, as skunks dig in water bowls and spill or soil the water frequently. Change water daily.

**MEDICAL CARE:** Home care may include nail trimming every 3-4 weeks. Tooth brushing with a canine/feline paste is recommended if the skunk is amenable to it; starting very young makes this easier. Bathing is optional but may reduce the skunk’s moderate musky odor. Pet skunks have been “descented” (anal sacs removed) before sale; spaying and neutering is recommended at 5-6 months old. Neutering or spaying reduces odor, and eliminates reproductive diseases in the females; neutering may help reduce aggression in males. Avoid purchasing skunks which have been neutered very young by the breeder, as early neutering in closely related species has been shown to increase the risk of certain health problems

Veterinary care is important. Canine distemper vaccine should be given at 8, 11 & 14 weeks of age and then annually; a safe brand is PureVax (Merial) which contains no actual distemper virus. Rabies vaccine is not approved for skunks. Skunks are susceptible to infectious canine hepatitis and leptospirosis, and vaccination for these diseases

is discretionary. Unless regularly contacting unvaccinated dogs or spending much time outdoors, the risk of a skunk's exposure to hepatitis or leptospirosis is low. Skunks are NOT susceptible to feline distemper or canine parvovirus, despite rumors to the contrary. Annual visits for exam and vaccines are recommended for skunks 1- 5 years old; exams may be done every 6 months on skunks over 5 years old. An annual blood profile in skunks over 4 years old helps detect disease. Fecal samples and deworming are important, as skunks can carry worms which may infect other household pets and even humans, sometimes producing severe disease.

### **DISEASE CONDITIONS:**

**FLEAS:** Skunks can carry the dog and cat fleas. Flea treatment involves topical flea products on the pet, and treating the house environment as well. Advantage (or Combiva) topical monthly drops have been found effective; use caution not to overdose these pets with a flea product.

**CANINE DISTEMPER VIRUS:** This is a deadly viral disease of dogs, ferrets and wildlife (foxes, raccoons, skunks etc). It can be brought indoors on shoes or other objects. Signs include nasal and eye discharge, chin rash, weakness, weight loss, hard crusty foot pads, and neurologic signs such as seizures, aggression, stupor and coma. Nearly all cases are fatal within 10 days. There is no really effective treatment; prevent this disease with vaccination

**GASTRIC FOREIGN BODIES:** Skunks may chew and swallow rubber items, which often lodge in the stomach or bowel. They also can develop hairballs in the stomach. Stomach foreign bodies may be non-symptomatic, or can cause tooth grinding, nausea, vomiting, decreased appetite, weight loss, and tarry black stools. If the object blocks the bowel, signs are immediate and severe and include depression, weakness, vomiting and appetite loss. Bowel blockage is a medical emergency. Diagnosis is via clinical signs, palpation, xrays, and sometimes surgical exam of the stomach. Treatment is via surgical removal. Prevent this problem via avoidance of rubber items which the skunk may chew on. Hairballs may be prevented with oral medication such as Laxatone; brush or pluck loose hair during times of heavy shedding (Spring & Fall usually).

**STOMACH & INTESTINAL DISEASES:** Skunks may exhibit vomiting, diarrhea, or appetite loss for a variety of reasons, including foreign bodies, food intolerance, parasites, bacterial infections, and other conditions. Accurate diagnosis starts with a thorough history and exam, a fecal analysis, and sometimes blood tests or x-rays. Treatment depends on the specific disease. Many gut upsets can be prevented via feeding a healthy stable diet. Avoid sugary treats, uncooked meats, milk, and sudden diet changes. Prevent your pet from chewing on soft rubbery items such as small chew toys or foam earplugs, which if swallowed can cause intestinal blockages. Blockages are emergencies; seek immediate veterinary care for any skunk with sudden appetite loss, lethargy and/or vomiting.

**HERPES NECROTIZING ENCEPHALITIS:** Skunks may be infected with the human herpes simplex virus, either the genital or oral ("cold sore") varieties. Symptoms include tremors, depression, lethargy, head bobbing and salivating. The virus causes severe inflammation of the skunk's brain, and the condition may be fatal. Some patients recover in 3-7 days. Avoid handling your skunk if you have a herpes lesion, and wash your hands well with antiseptic soap before handling the skunk's food or cage.

**DENTAL DISEASE:** Like other carnivores skunks may develop tartar, gingivitis and periodontal disease with age. Brushing may reduce plaque and improve dental health; cleaning and polishing teeth under anesthesia may be needed when a skunk has significant tartar and dental disease. Fractured or infected teeth might need extraction.

**HEART DISEASE:** Skunks may develop cardiomyopathy, a degenerative condition of the heart muscle of unknown cause. Amino acid deficiencies (taurine, carnitine) have been found to cause some cardiomyopathies in dogs and cats, but no nutritional link is known in skunks. Symptoms are seen only in advanced cases and may include lethargy, bloating, difficulty breathing, wheezing, and weight loss. Heart problems may be detected earlier via regular veterinary exams; there is no cure, but early treatment can slow the heart degeneration and prolong life.

**OBESITY:** Skunks easily become overweight due to their love of food and tendency to become lazy. If they eat too much or if the diet is high in calories, they can become extremely obese. This leads to reduced activity and increased risk of other health problems, including fatty liver disease. Prevent obesity with measured feedings of a balanced low calorie diet and regular exercise.

**INTESTINAL PARASITES:** Skunks are commonly infected with a roundworm, *Baylisascaris columnaris*, which can infect other types of animals and possibly humans, sometimes causing eye or brain damage. Fecal samples should be examined when the skunk is young to detect parasites; treatment is via multiple doses of deworming medication until recheck fecal samples are persistently negative. Preventing reinfestation (via exposure of the pet to its own feces) is very important. Litter boxes should be cleaned frequently during deworming, and cage surfaces disinfected with bleach when possible. Avoid wood cage bottoms which are porous and may become permanently contaminated with worm eggs. When cleaning the litter box or handling fecal samples, use disposable latex gloves to avoid exposure to worm eggs. Tapeworms and lungworms are less of a problem, mostly found in wild skunks.