



# Exotic Animal Hospital of Philadelphia

## **Caring for your Skunk**

You got a new skunk? Congratulations!

Please refer to this handout in helping you setting your new skunk up for success as most of the diseases and emergency presentations to the veterinary hospital stem from improper husbandry and could be avoided.

### **Did you know?**

- Skunks are mammals belonging to the Mephitidae family, which was a subfamily within the Mustelidae (which includes ferrets, weasels, otters, badgers, stoats and wolverines), but recent genetic evidence suggests skunks are not as closely related to badgers as thought, so they are now a separate family.
- There are 11 different species of skunks. The striped skunk (*Mephitis mephitis*) is the species most commonly kept as a companion animal.
  - Their natural range is from southern Canada into the US and northern Mexico.
  - The typical colouration pattern in striped skunks consists of black fur with a white V running down the back and a white stripe running between the eyes from the top of the head to the tip of the snout.
  - Another colour found in the pet trade is brown and red
- State and local authorities may have specific regulations, licensing requirements or even prohibitions regarding skunk ownership.
- Contact with a free-ranging skunk in the wild should be avoided and never kept as companion animals.



### **What do skunks eat?**

- Free-ranging skunks are omnivorous, with a diet consisting of insects, rodents, birds, fruits and vegetables.
  - In the wild they are one of the primary predators of the honeybee; their thick coats protecting them against the stings.
- In captivity, their diet can consist of low-fat dry dog food supplemented with vegetables, fruits and insects. Cottage cheese, yogurt and dry milk can be offered daily. One egg with the shell or a mouse can be offered weekly to help meet calcium requirements.
- They should always have access to water either in a bottle or spill-proof bowls.
- Although nocturnal, skunks can adapt to partially diurnal lifestyle and can be fed either in the morning or at night.

- Overfeeding or feeding foods with high-fat content (cat food or moist canned dog food) must be avoided as skunks have a tendency to become obese
- Feeding raw meat is not recommended, because it may contain some potentially zoonotic

### **Enclosure:**

- Most skunks need to be caged individually once they are adults.
  - Only young skunks and nonpregnant females seem to tolerate the company of other skunks.
  - Many skunks that are raised individually and are well integrated into a home, may not accept another skunk.
- Skunks can be destructive so owners should skunk-proof their house if they are going to be kept indoors.
  - They can climb and open cabinets, dig at carpets and steal objects.
  - They should be prevented from accessing household poisons and chemicals, open toilet bowls, wet/dirty bedding and electrical cords.
- Young skunks need to be confined when unsupervised. Their enclosure should be spacious, sturdy and durable enough to prevent digging or chewing to escape.
  - They can be trained to use a litter tray.
  - Unscented litter should be used and cleaned regularly.
- An adult indoor skunk should be provided with sleeping quarters inside a large den.
  - This will make it feel secure. The den can be made out of a cardboard box or a large plastic shelter (dog carrier). It should contain cloth blankets, sheets or other bedding that can be removed and washed frequently.
- Skunks can also be housed outside in a large cage with sleeping quarters. Make sure it is escape proof.
- Environmental enrichment is paramount for skunks. Disposable and easily cleaned toys should be provided.
  - These might include ping pong balls, tennis balls, paper bags and cardboard boxes.

### **Health Concerns and what to look out for at home:**

- **Malnutrition/obesity**
  - Common and can lead to deficiencies and diseases, such as metabolic bone disease (MBD).
    - Signs for MBD: gradual decrease of activity and difficulty walking. Pain and discomfort with movement.
    - Diagnosis will be based on radiography (Xrays) and low calcium levels (ionised calcium) on blood test
    - Treatment will be aimed at controlling the pain and improvement of diet.
  - Overfeeding or feeding fatty foods/excessive treats together with lack of exercise can lead to obesity.
    - Obesity can increase the risk of other health problems such as fatty liver disease.

- **Dental disease**
  - Common to see gingivitis, tartar and periodontal disease.
  - Dog chews and regular home dental cleaning can be used as a preventive.
  - In severe cases, dental treatment under general anaesthesia, including cleaning, polishing and occasional extractions, might be required.
  
- **Heart disease**
  - Skunks can develop cardiac disease. Amino acid deficiencies, such as taurine and carnitine, could play a role in some skunk cardiomyopathies.
  - Symptoms that can be seen in advanced cases include lethargy, ascites (fluid in the abdomen), dyspnoea (difficulty breathing) and weight loss.
  
- **Aleutian disease (AD)**
  - Caused by a parvovirus. It is known to infect various members of the Mustelidae family, with mink and ferrets being the most common hosts.
  - AD in adult animals can result in multiple organ failure.
    - Can present with a debilitating/wasting disease or sudden death.
    - No specific treatment is available, but supportive treatment with antibiotics and steroids might give some relief.
  
- **Toxoplasmosis**
  - Clinical signs include fever, lymphadenitis, splenomegaly, myocarditis, pneumonitis, hepatitis and encephalitis.
  - Diagnosis is based on serology.
  - Prevention is extremely important and contact should be avoided with feline species and feline faeces.
  
- **Lungworm**
  - Lungworm is more commonly seen in wild skunks.
  - Clinical signs include cachexia, anaemia, coughing, dyspnoea, depression, nasal discharge and neurological signs.
  - The diagnosis is based on fecal samples
  
- **External parasites**
  - Fleas and sarcoptic mange can be seen in skunks
  
- **Rectal prolapse in juveniles**
  - Juvenile rectal prolapse is generally seen secondary to internal parasitism.
  - Regular fecal samples and deworming are advisable in this species.
  - Environmental control including regular cleaning of litter trays and disinfection of surfaces is paramount.
  - A specific risk is the zoonotic potential of *Baylisascaris columnaris*, which can cause encephalitis in humans. The larvae can migrate to human nervous tissues and there is no treatment for infected humans.

