PORCUPINE QUILLS

What is it? Porcupine quill impalement is a very painful experience for both you and your dog or cat. Porcupines have over 30,000 quills each, and when startled they raise these quills using tiny erector muscles under their skin. When an animal or a person comes in contact with a porcupine and touches the quills, they become imbedded in their flesh and detach from the porcupine.

Who gets it? What animals are affected? Both dogs and cats can investigate porcupines and come away with imbedded quills. Usually your pet is curious about the porcupine and gets closer to investigate. If they put their face too close, they will be slapped with the tail and will have imbedded quills in their face, neck, or chest. If they attempt to bite the porcupine they can have imbedded quills in their mouth, tongue, and gums. Some animals even attempt to paw at porcupines and come away with quills in the legs, feet, and paws.

What are the clinical signs? You will be able to see quills protruding from your pet if they have taken on a porcupine. Most owners describe their pets as looking “like a pincushion.” Porcupine quills are up to 3 inches long, approximately the thickness of a round toothpick, the shaft is white in color, and the tip imbedded in your pet will be dark brown to black in color. There may be only a handful of quills, or there may be several hundred in your pet.

How is it diagnosed? Diagnosis is performed by a visual exam of you pet to see both the approximate number of quills imbedded as well as the areas of the body that have received quills.

How is it treated? Porcupine quills must be removed from your pet. Removal can be done at home if your pet has only taken a handful of quills, if they are not in the mouth, ears, or around the eyes, and if your pet is cooperative. Remember, the only way your pet has to tell you that it hurts is to bite, and quill removal can be quite painful. Pain can cause even the most docile pet to react poorly and bite their owner.

For removal at home, you will need a small pair of pliers to grip the quills, warm soapy water to clean the wounds, and a second person to help calm your pet and keep them still. With the pliers, grip the quill as close to the skin as possible without actually gripping the skin. Pull straight out – use a slow, gentle pull – do not yank the quill out as it may break. Once all of the quills have been removed, wash the affected areas with the warm soapy water being careful not to get it in the eyes, ears, or nose of your pet. It is recommended that you contact your veterinarian as soon as possible to discuss the incident, how your pet is feeling after quill removal, and whether or not they would like your pet to be on antibiotics.
If your pet has quills in the mouth, ears, or around the eyes, removal at your veterinarian’s office or the nearest emergency clinic is recommended. Also, if you pet has taken a large number of quills, pain medications and anesthesia makes multiple quill removal much less painful. The doctor will examine your pet and make recommendations for pain medication, sedation, and/or anesthesia based on your pet’s medical history, location of, and number of the quills. Once your pet is pain medicated and sedated or anesthetized as needed, the quills will be pulled. If any quills are imbedded whole in your pet, a small incision into the skin will be made to remove the quill. Antibiotic therapy may be initiated depending upon the location and number of the quills. Pain medication may be provided for you to administer to your pet at home as they heal.

**What is the aftercare?** You will need to monitor the quill sites for redness, swelling, or discharge. If any of these occur, contact your veterinarian or the nearest emergency clinic for advice. Administer antibiotics and pain medication as directed by the prescribing veterinarian. Keep your pet from irritating the area from which the quills were removed. If quills were removed from their face and neck, they may need an e-collar to keep from rubbing and scratching their face. They may also need an e-collar if quills were removed from an area that they can reach to lick.

**What is the prognosis?** Prognosis following quill removal is generally good. A few pets that have taken a large number of quills will need supportive care in the hospital while they are recovering from the quill removal. Following recovery your pet may even remember to avoid porcupines. Some do not learn to avoid them, and if they are not kept away from porcupines, in the future will repeat their experience. In a small number of pets, quills that break off under the skin can migrate through the body and can cause problems later on in life.

**Can this be prevented?** Yes, most porcupine encounters can be prevented. Porcupines are very docile, quiet creatures that just want to be left alone. They will not go out looking to pick a fight with your pet. However, with urban and rural areas coming into closer contact with each other, it is becoming more common to see a porcupine in the city and possibly even in your backyard. Dogs kept on leash can be kept away from these very interesting but very prickly little guys. Cats kept indoors can be kept away from them completely.