SKUNK ODORS

What is it? Skunks are an easily identifiable small mammal that lives throughout North America. They carry with them their own personal stink-bomb defense. You will find that most skunks in Wisconsin are the typical black and white striped variety made famous by the Warner Bros. cartoon character Pepé le Pew. However, the Eastern Spotted Skunk has a small-pocketed population along our shared border with Minnesota. This skunk is also black and white but has elongated white spots instead of stripes and a primarily white tail. The Eastern Spotted Skunk is also known to be less tolerant of people and animals disturbing it, and more likely to spray with little or no warning. When any skunk feels threatened, they turn their back on you, raise their tails, and spray an oily liquid from grape sized glands located under their tails. Unfortunately, skunks can spray a target up to 10 feet away with extreme accuracy, and once sprayed, their target has a very difficult time getting rid of the smell.

What animals are affected? Both dogs and cats can investigate skunks and come away sprayed. Usually your pet is curious about the skunk and gets closer to investigate. They may be sprayed in the face, eyes, ears, chest, or if they turn fast enough, sprayed on the side or the back end. Occasionally dogs will find a deceased skunk and decide to roll in it transferring the skunk smell onto themselves.

What are the clinical signs? The odor is the most noticeable clinical sign. Most people describe it as “rotten eggs” or a sulfur type of smell, which you will notice even if you did not see your dog get sprayed. If your dog was sprayed in the face or eyes they will often paw at or rub their faces on things. Their eyes may appear red or bloodshot and may even swell.

How is it diagnosed? The smell is the best diagnostic tool for determining if an animal got sprayed by a skunk. The reason skunk spray smells so very bad to us is that it is made up of a chemical compound called a thiol. Humans can smell thiols in extremely small concentrations, just a few parts per million, which is why it is added to natural gas; it allows humans to notice if there is a leak, even if that leak is extremely small.

How is it treated? Skunk sprayed pets can be treated at home or at your veterinarian’s office. If your pet got sprayed and was not sprayed in the face, eyes, or ears then you can try to wash the smell off at home. If possible carry your pet into the house in a towel or blanket that is easily washable. A freshly sprayed animal can transfer skunk smell to anything it touches and getting this smell out of the furniture usually proves very frustrating. Tomato juice, while widely known, is not an effective treatment. There are a variety of commercial skunk odor remedies available at most pet stores as well as some stores such as Wal-Mart, Target, and Shopko. Follow the manufacturer’s directions for use.

The most effective home remedy is:
1. 1 qt of hydrogen peroxide (use a fresh bottle of peroxide as it slowly begins to turn to water after being opened)
2. ¼ cup baking soda
3. 1 tsp of Dawn dishwashing liquid soap
Mix these ingredients together in an open container. Do NOT mix or store in a sealed bottle – the oxygen conversion and release that takes place will cause the bottle to burst. Do NOT mix ahead of time. Do NOT store leftover solution. Using gloves, wet your pet with lukewarm water and work this solution into the coat while it is still bubbly. Let sit for five minutes. Rinse off completely. Do not get in your pets eyes, ears or nose. Do not allow your pet to drink the solution. The peroxide may cause your pet’s coat to bleach temporarily so your black lab may look like a chocolate lab for a few weeks.

If your pet got sprayed in the face, it is best to see your veterinarian or the nearest emergency facility as soon as possible. If they have red, watery, or swollen eyes, any kind of ocular discharge after being sprayed, or are pawing or rubbing at their face, then it is very possible that they got sprayed in the eyes. Your veterinarian will be able to flush the eyes, treat their discomfort, and help in removing the smell. In some cases, corneal ulcers can result from a pet being sprayed in the face or eyes.

**What is the aftercare?** Aftercare is usually minimal. If your pet was not sprayed in the face and you are able to remove the smell at home, the only further care your pet will need is to be kept away from skunks in the future. If your pet was sprayed in the face and saw a veterinarian for treatment, follow that veterinarian’s instructions. Administer eye medications (if any are dispensed) as directed by the prescribing veterinarian.

**What is the prognosis?** Prognosis is generally good. Even if sprayed in the face, animals usually experience discomfort but not vision loss. However, there is one case report of a dog that developed a severe anemia after being sprayed by a skunk. If your dog becomes lethargic or weak up to a few days following exposure to skunk spray, see your veterinarian or the nearest emergency veterinarian as soon as possible.

**Can it be prevented?** Yes, most skunk encounters can be prevented. Skunks are fairly docile, quiet, nocturnal creatures that just want to be left alone. While they are opportunistic eaters, they will not go out looking to spray your pet without feeling threatened. The common striped skunk also uses its natural defense sparingly because it can take up to 10 days for the glands to secrete enough oil for them to be able to spray again. However, with urban and rural areas coming into closer contact with each other, it is becoming more common to see a skunk in the city and possibly even living in your backyard. Dogs kept on leash can be kept away from these very interesting but very odorous little guys. Cats kept indoors can be kept away from them completely. As with porcupines, many dogs do not learn from previous exposure to stay away from skunks – keep this in mind, as your pet could be a “repeat offender.”