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Porcupine Quills in Dogs and Their Dangers

I just moved to a rural area, and a friend has warned me about my dogs getting hurt by porcupines and their quills. This is something new to me. What should I know about the risks associated with porcupines and their quills for my dogs?

Porcupines are the third largest rodent and live in many rural areas in North America. They range in weight between 15 and 35 pounds. They are herbivores, slow-moving, and have poor eyesight, although they have a great sense of smell. Because they are nocturnal, they do most of their feeding at night. They are not aggressive, but they happily defend themselves, their offspring, and their dens if needed.

"Quills are modified along the shaft into scales that act like fishhook barbs that cause the quills to keep moving inward, deeper into the tissue."



Quills are actually modified hairs and are covered with the protein keratin. They are modified along the shaft into scales that act like fishhook barbs that cause the quills to keep moving inward, deeper into the tissue. Porcupine quills can puncture the skin and move through muscle, ultimately penetrating into body cavities and internal organs. Because the quills carry bacteria with them, once they penetrate the skin they can serve as a source of infection and abscesses.

I have heard that porcupines can “throw” or “shoot” their quills to defend themselves. Is this true?

Porcupines cannot shoot their quills at an assailant. That said, the quills are easily pulled from the porcupine's skin once they come into contact with an animal attacker. Porcupines will also use their quill-filled tail like a club, swinging it at a potential threat.

Will porcupine quills eventually work their way out of the skin if nothing is done to remove them?

Because of the tiny barbs on the shaft of porcupine quills, they actually tend to move **inward** – deeper into the tissues – rather than working themselves **out**. This opens the door for infection, and the deeper the quills penetrate, the more serious the infection can be. Dogs can end up with abscesses over much of the body, making treatment much more complicated and increasing the risk for a systemic infection that is potentially fatal.

I also heard that I should cut the quills in order to make them easier to remove. Should I do that if my dog gets into a spat with a porcupine?

"Cutting the shaft makes the quill splinter more easily which ultimately makes it harder to remove."

It is simply a misconception that cutting embedded porcupine quills will “deflate” them, making it easier to remove them. Cutting the shaft makes the quill splinter more easily which ultimately makes it harder to remove. It may also allow for segments of quills to become lodged in the tissues.

Can I remove the porcupine quills from my dogs myself if needed?

No. Removing porcupine quills without the benefit of sedation or anesthesia and potent pain relief is extremely painful. This can result in a struggle, which can push the quills deeper, and a dog may lash out and bite, without meaning to hurt you.

Since porcupine quills are not a do-it-yourself project, what should I do if my dogs get “quilled”?

Minimize the dog’s movements, and prevent him from rubbing his face if there are quills present, as this may drive quills deeper, making them irretrievable. Get to a veterinarian as quickly as possible. Dogs need deep sedation or general anesthesia in order to have porcupine quills removed safely. As many quills as possible will be removed, but it is important to understand that there may be quills that cannot be removed. Any that cannot be removed will be monitored for migration and any complications that may arise.

What are some potential complications for my dogs being “quilled” by a porcupine?

The most serious potential complication of porcupine quills is infection deep in the tissues. Migrating quills can also embed in joints, poke into the eye, or even penetrate into the brain or other organs, creating a real life-threatening health crisis.

If a dog gets a mouthful of porcupine quills, will they learn to leave porcupines alone?

Unfortunately, most dogs who get into trouble with porcupines do **not** learn from their mistakes. The best defense against porcupine quills is prevention. Avoid allowing the dogs to roam at dusk or after dark, and prevent them from going into areas with known porcupine dens.

This client information sheet is based on material written by: Robin Downing, DVM, DAAPM, DACVSMR, CVPP, CRPP

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