

Care of the Virginia Opossum

The Virginia opossum is the only marsupial native to North America. Like most marsupials, the female opossum has a deep pouch or marsupium. Although veterinarians are allowed to provide humane care to any injured or orphaned wild animal, it is important to know your state laws as it is illegal to keep a pet opossum in many states.

Diet

The opossum is an omnivore. In the wild, animals eat a varied diet that includes green and yellow vegetables, grasses and leaves, grains, fruits, seeds and bulbs, carrion, snails, slugs and worms, insects, rats and mice, reptiles and birds, eggs, amphibians, crayfish, and fish

Feed pet opossums a balanced diet offered once daily or divided between two meals. Components of the diet should include:

- Small amounts of high-quality (meat-based) dog and/or cat food or a pelleted insectivore/omnivore diet (i.e. Mazuri). The latter foods are generally lower in fat than dog/cat foods, and a low-fat diet is better for pet opossums. (Ex: 6 tbsp dry cat food + 7 tbsp canned dog food daily).
- Chopped, mixed vegetables (1/2 cup)
- Small amounts of fruit (2-3 tsp)
- A protein source like hard-boiled egg with the shell, whole mice (~30g), canned salmon, yogurt, cooked chicken liver, cooked tofu, or 1-2 calcium gut-loaded crickets or other dusted adult insects, like mealworms (i.e. 1 king mealworm or 3-4 mealworms) or several earthworms offered 3-4 times weekly.
- Lactose-based sugars, like milk, are poorly tolerated by opossums and should be avoided.

Housing

A modified rabbit or ferret cage is often used for pet opossums. Virginia opossums tend to be solitary animals and are best housed alone except when raised together as juveniles. Shredded or pelleted recycled newspaper makes an appropriate bedding. Keep the cage clean and dry to prevent foot problems. If you allow your pet out of its cage, constant supervision is recommended. If you elect to house your pet outdoors, know that opossums can dig beneath fences. House adults in yards at least 30 x 50 m (33 x 55 yd.).

Cage size: Young opossums, whether housed individually or together, require a cage at least 35 cm (1.1 ft) high x 45 cm (1.5 ft) wide x 75 cm (2.5 ft) long.

Temperature & humidity: The ideal temperature for housing an opossum is 22°C (71.6°F), with an appropriate range of 10-30°C (50-86°F). Environmental humidity should exceed 58%.

Cage furniture: Provide some form of visual security, like a cardboard or wooden box filled with newspaper pellets, shredded paper, or wood shavings. The nest box should be at least 30 x 45 x 40 cm (1 x 1.5 x 1.5 ft). Opossums tend to select a latrine area and can be trained to use a litter box or newspapers. Virginia opossums are agile climbers, so also provide climbing structures.

Behavior

Opossums in the wild are nocturnal. Activity begins around dusk and continues until dawn however pet animals can adjust to their owner's daytime schedule.

“Playing possum” is a rare behavior most frequently displayed in young animals in response to a threat in which the opossum falls over and lies motionless to feign death.

Lifespan

In the wild, opossums live only about 1.5-2 years, however pets can live between 3-7 years. There are rare reports of pet opossums living 8-10 years.

Health care

Obesity is one of the most common medical conditions seen in pet opossums. All marsupials have a relatively slow metabolic rate. Pairing the voracious appetite of the opossum with a relatively low requirement for nutrients and calories means it is easy to overfeed your pet. To minimize the risk of obesity, carefully monitor the diet and make sure your opossum does not eat too much or eat another animal's food. Also encourage exercise. Opossums are agile climbers, and they can also swim, run, and dig. Your veterinarian will want to design a regular program of weighing and body condition scoring to monitor your pet's body weight.

Spaying and neutering is recommended for pet opossums. Virginia opossums become sexually mature between 6-8 months of age and can breed year-round. Neutering significantly reduces the incidence of scent marking behavior in male opossums. Females that have not been spayed tend to be extremely restless. They frequently pace and drool on household objects while making clicking sounds. Spaying also significantly reduces the risk of chronic infections of the urinary and reproductive tracts.

Your veterinarian will also want to perform regular fecal parasite exams in your opossum. Virginia opossums can shed a number of parasites in the feces, including *Sarcocystis* spp., which can be transmitted to humans.

References

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