

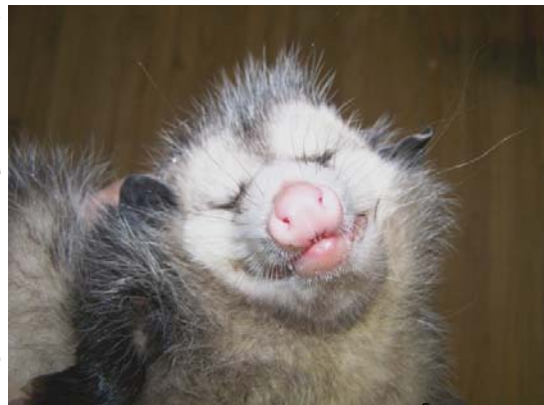
Patient Tale: A Poisoned Rat?

Late in October a Gaithersburg Animal Control officer arrived at the Center with a Virginia Opossum in a humane trap. He said they had loaned the trap to a citizen who complained he had rats he wanted to remove from his property. Opossums are commonly mistaken for rats as they have a long snout and a furless tail, but unlike rats the adults are about the size of a house cat, if not larger. Much to my horror inside the trap with the opossum was a tray of rat poison. I couldn't comprehend why someone would use a *humane* trap but put a deadly poison in it to use as bait!

The poison was bright green and the opossum had apparently eaten the contents of the entire tray. He himself was impressively stained by the poisonous gunk. It looked almost as if he was getting his Space Alien costume ready for Halloween. Luckily for him, he had only been trapped the night before and the poison had not yet taken its full effect.

I knew from my years of experience in the veterinary field that rat poison causes a slow uncomfortable death by preventing the blood from clotting. The animal slowly bleeds to death. Vitamin K, one of the lesser-known vitamins, aids in blood clotting. Fortunately, we always keep some handy in its fast-acting injectable form. I removed the rat poison tray from the trap and immediately called the emergency number on the tray. It was to the company who made the poison. I was told it was a 2nd generation poison, but still toxic. I explained the situation and they instructed me as to the dose of Vitamin K and the duration of treatment. I weighed and thoroughly examined the opossum. Although I found no other injuries and no obvious signs of internal bleeding yet, he acted a little lethargic and was dehydrated. I knew the quicker we started treatment the better his chances would be. His course of treatment would take at least three weeks.

We obtained a blood sample the next day to check his clotting time and knew he was in a bit of trouble. It took approximately 25 minutes for his blood to clot. A healthy animal's blood should clot in no more than one minute. You can only give injectable Vitamin K for one to two days, and then you must give it orally. Vitamin K comes in capsules as well as injectable form, but making sure he'd get an accurate dose isn't easy with capsules. To help ensure the success of his treatment I found a compounding pharmacy and had a liquid suspension made in the dose he would need.



Ewww-yuck-charcoal face

The poor guy had terrible diarrhea, which was not helping his dehydration! His stool for the next few days was bright green-it almost glowed. We had to give him activated charcoal by gavage, a tube inserted directly into his stomach, twice. The charcoal would absorb the poison and help it pass through his digestive system safely. We also had to give him subcutaneous fluids several times as he wasn't eating or drinking well. You wouldn't feel much like eating either if you were full of rat poison and charcoal!

After a week, the opossum had turned the corner. He was starting to eat better every day. Over the next few weeks we checked his blood and the clotting time was steadily improving. We also

checked his stool and did find some evidence of parasites and went ahead and treated him for those as well.

At the end of his treatment volunteer vet Dr. Cinthia Fabretti-Apling gave him a thorough check-up and tested his clotting time. It took less than a minute for his blood to clot. He was producing normal stool and was even a little on the heavy side now - a testament to the delicious dinners he wolfed down nightly. He was given the all clear from the vet to place him outside in one of our opossum pre-release cages. We wanted to make sure with all he'd been through that he could handle the cold temperatures and wouldn't have any other problems on his own.

Exactly one month after he first was carried through our doors, we decided he was ready to go. The weather was good and he was doing great. That afternoon I released him. I wished him luck and told him to avoid eating anything bright green! Without a word of thanks he took off under a brush pile and then shot straight up a tree. I was very happy to see that he was acting like a healthy wild animal should. I knew he was going to be just fine.

by Kathleen Handley, Staff



Back in the wild.