

Patient Tale: Do Not Feed the Squirrels!

It was a dark and stormy night in early August. Well, my thoughts were dark and stormy; the night itself was quite mild. My bedroom windows were open and I could hear the rustlings of the raccoons in the dumpster down the walk and the gentle snoring of my husband as he lay snuggled in bed.

And where was I, you might ask, at this late, late hour of two in the morning? Why, I was feeding the dozen or so baby squirrels that required sustenance every two hours around the clock. About half of these babies were just young, about a week old, typical of this time of year. Three were older, approximately three-weeks-old (therefore normally not requiring these types of feedings), but the citizens that found them fed them orange-flavored Gatorade every two hours around the clock for two days before they were able to bring them in. Another group of three (also about three-weeks-old) were fed cow's milk for five days by the citizen who found them. These were brought in because they were "not lookin' so hot" and they had very snotty noses (improperly trained hands can cause formula to go down the wrong way, bringing infection into young lungs). All of the "Sick Six" were emaciated and dehydrated with patchy coats of coarse fur, very loose stool, and crusty noses.



One of the "Gatorade" squirrels; photo taken after initial exam. Three-week-old female weighing 39 grams (normal weight at this age: 50 to 65 grams. Note the scruffy coat, droopy ears, lack of muscle tone and general lethargy.

Days upon endless days turned into weeks upon endless weeks as I struggled with these squirrels, swapping my original healthy babies for other healthy babies that needed feedings throughout the night. Though they were older, I was still keeping my "Sick Six" on every two hour feedings as they grew ever so painstakingly slowly. I had already been struggling with insomnia over the past year and now what little sleep I was getting was being plagued by nightmares of sick squirrels. And when I was awake, I would silently curse my husband for how peaceful he looked, all curled up under the covers with our cats. Not that any of this was his fault but I blamed anyone who was sleeping more than two hours every night.

The healthy babies came and went; I would always feed them last, like a reward for getting through the sickies. They were so soft and normal looking, unlike my six who were gaining weight at a snail's pace of two to three grams every other day. The healthy squirrels would gain five to ten grams every other day, soon no longer needing to come home with me and thriving at the Center. After three weeks of painstaking feedings (many of them required me to tube feed them when they were too weak to suckle) and various medications to fight back the infection in their lungs and their diarrhea (with subsequent dehydration), I poked around in my "Gatorade" bin and found that one of the three girls had passed on sometime between the two am and four am feeding. I cried for forty-five minutes as I fed everyone else.

Even at the Center, I got little relief as other staff members and volunteers would not feed my babies, partially because they were too pitiful to watch and mostly because they knew I would throw a fit if anything went wrong. I am lovely that way. My "Sick Five" now had their eyes open and their incisors were growing in, but they were still half the size of healthy squirrels their age. I found myself wondering if I should continue their struggle or if it was better to put them to

sleep. Was I being fair to them? Was I being fair to myself and the rest of the patients at the Center? Then I discovered another "Gatorade" girl plus one of my "cow's milk" boys had died between the eight am and noon feedings. I was down to "Sick Three". After I locked myself in the bathroom for a half hour to cry (and to avoid scaring away the volunteers I so adore), I made up my mind. There was no way in hell I would give up now.

Another group of squirrels came in, also emaciated, but only because they had lost their mother. The citizen who found them knew that the best thing to do was to keep them warm and safe, feed them nothing, and get them to the Center as quickly as possible. As I blessed her for doing the right thing, I inwardly moaned. Now I had "Orphaned Four" to add to my collection.

For a bit, things appeared to be getting better: weight was still being gained (however slowly), breathing was getting easier, and stools were firming. Then, in early September, disaster struck in the form of bacterial infection brought in by another baby squirrel. Not a terrible infection, one very easily cured in all the other squirrels by a broad-spectrum antibiotic, but when my babies caught it, they went downhill fast. Back on antibiotics, plus an antiprotozoal to settle their already overworked intestines. I began tinkering around with different formulas, trying to add fat and calories without upsetting their already compromised systems with the addition of a formula they never had before. Adding probiotics and extremely soluble baby fiber seemed to help with the diarrhea, though not nearly fast enough for me. My heart ached to watch my stick-thin babies crawl around their bins, trying to engage in play activity but falling over with the effort. I got in the habit of taking a bin of healthy squirrels home with me as a sanity pacifier. They did not need any extra feedings, but I needed something to fall back on as I watched my "Sick Three" and "Orphaned Four" struggle through life.

Finally, in mid-September, a breakthrough occurred. My "Orphaned Four" easily kicked the bacterial infection and were gaining weight at the normal rate. Their fur was growing in nice and thick, their teeth were healthy and strong, and they could romp with the best of them. My remaining "Gatorade" girl was also at a near-normal weight while finally overcoming her third bout of the sniffles and fourth bout of diarrhea. My "cow's milk" siblings were also pulling through, though not quite at the pace of my "Gatorade" girl, but then, she always seemed to be the over-achiever. The only problem with my now not-quite-so-sick "Sick Three" was their fur. Due to their horrible nutritional status in the very important beginning stages of life, their tiny bodies spent most of their energy keeping them alive and now their fur was thin and sparse. I tinkered with their formula yet again, trying to add still more calories and the proper dose of calcium and phosphorus (luckily for me, I am a chem. nut so calculating the dietary dosage for proper absorption was not too difficult and actually a little fun). I felt that I could now safely cut them back from being fed every two hours through the night (and every four throughout the day) to every four hours around the clock. This netted me an extra hour of sleep each night. Oh, it was lovely. I did not hate my husband quite so much at that point. Nor the rest of the world.



The "Sick Three" plus their new "sibling." Photo taken in early October when they were down to 4x daily feedings. The black squirrel, a healthy baby, was added a week prior to the photo.

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By late September, everyone was off all medications. My "Sick Three" looked a little silly with their thin fur and tails, but they were playing, eating, and drinking to the hearts content. My "Orphaned Four" had also pulled through and looked like every other healthy squirrel in the building. With a much lighter heart, I left them at the Center as they no longer needed feedings throughout the night. My "Sick Three" were now down to only an additional midnight feeding although my brain continued to wake me and my heart continued to make me check on them. I would watch them sleep peacefully for a half hour at a time, so heartbreakingly happy to see them succeed at life.

Now, in early November, I get to watch them bounce around in their outdoor cages, all fat and fluffy. As it is too late to release them this year, this is not quite a "true" patient tale, but I know they will make it through this winter just fine. Especially the way I feed them.

by Brittany Davis, staff



The "Gatorade" survivor, same female from original photo. Photo taken in mid-October directly before she was upgraded to 3x daily feedings and moved into a larger wire cage with her "siblings."