

# *Porcupines and their Quills*

With spring finally here and all the wildlife coming out of their dens, porcupines are one of the many we will see. At the Stettler Veterinary Clinic it is a common occurrence to see dogs (most commonly), horses, donkeys, and cows coming in after becoming a little too curious about these funny little creatures.

Porcupines are nocturnal rodents whose bodies are covered in quills that can easily be released if the porcupine is provoked. Porcupines have thousands of quills covering their body and can defend themselves against multiple dogs, and can regrow their quills over the years. A common myth is that porcupines “shoot” their quills; this is false, an animal must come into contact with the porcupine for the quills to release. Most commonly we see farm/acreage dogs coming in after they have been defending their home/farm. We strongly encourage all pet owners to bring in their animals as soon as possible. Research has shown that the longer quills are left in the animal the greater increase of complications, whether that be infection, broken quills, migrating quills, or more difficulty removing the quills in general. The longer the quills are left in the animal the softer and more difficult they are to remove. Another myth on the internet is that if you cut the quills they will “deflate” thus making the quills easier to remove. This is false, quills are hollow and cutting them will just cause them to splinter and make removing them a lot harder.

Due to the nature of the quill, they can be quite difficult and painful to remove. The



dark end of the quill (most often sticking into the animal) is barbed (like a fish hook) thus allowing it to firmly attach itself in its predator's body. This is why at the clinic we will sedate your pet in order to pull the quills; is for their comfort and our safety. It is not recommended to try removing the quills yourself as some dogs may become aggressive due to the pain. Often dogs will try to bite the porcupine thus imbedding the quills in their mouth and gums. The quill can also introduce dirt and infection into the animal. There are times your veterinarian will want to place your pet on antibiotics but only when they feel it is necessary. If a quill is broken off and a part of the quill is left in the animal the veterinarian may perform what is called a cut down. This involves taking a scalpel blade and creating an incision next to, or on top of the quill in order to retrieve it. They will then suture the incision closed.

Another myth we often hear is if a dog is "quilled" once he will learn his lesson and stay away from porcupines. Unfortunately, experience seems to dictate otherwise. We have the nickname "serial quillers" for those dogs we see multiple times a year for porcupine quills. It is recommended to keep these dogs either in a fenced yard or in the house, especially at night when porcupines are most active.