

# How to Clean the Skunk Scent from a Pet

## BACKGROUND

In areas where skunks live, it is common for pets to have encounters with them. Skunks have glands that aerosolize a very powerful and pungent scent as a defense mechanism. When a skunk sprays another animal, the scent is absorbed by the fur, and it is also a strong irritant to the eyes, nose, and mouth.

## GETTING STARTED

To wash a pet that has been sprayed by a skunk, you will need: old clothing and towels that can be soiled, rubber gloves, a water source, and a skunk odor-removing solution. There are several washes available commercially for this purpose. Ideally, take the pet to an outdoor area where it can be washed without contaminating the home.

To make a homemade skunk scent removal solution, combine in a bucket:

- 1 quart (1 L) of 3% household or medical-grade hydrogen peroxide (DO NOT USE 30% industrial strength hydrogen peroxide)
- 1/4 cup (60 mL or 60 grams) baking soda (sodium bicarbonate)
- 1 teaspoon (5 mL) liquid dishwashing detergent

These ingredients should be easily purchased at a supermarket and/or pharmacy. Do not combine the ingredients in a bottle, as the fizzing action of hydrogen peroxide may cause overflow or explosion.

Other useful materials from a pharmacy include:

- Cotton balls (as earplugs for the pet, if the side of the head needs to be washed)
- Eye lubricant ointment (if the front of the head/face was sprayed, as is often the case)

Be prepared to bathe your pet several times to remove the majority of the smell. It also may take several launderings for clothing that comes in contact with skunk spray to smell fresh.

## TROUBLESHOOTING BEFOREHAND

Be sure to avoid having any of this mixture reach the eyes, which would be very irritating (all three ingredients are ocular irritants). At the very beginning, it is best to place a half-inch (1-cm) strip of sterile ocular lubricant ointment (e.g., Lacri-Lube), which can be

purchased without a prescription; then be sure to close the eyelids together as well when washing and rinsing, to reduce the risk of ocular exposure.

Peroxide is a bleaching solution, so dark-coated animals may develop a paler coat in the regions where the solution is applied, especially if it is left on for more than 10 minutes before rinsing.

## PROCEDURE

If a pet's eyes or mouth are obviously irritated after being sprayed by a skunk, rinse these areas immediately with water. Rinse the mouth out such that the pet's face is pointing downward so water can safely fall out of the mouth and not be inhaled.

Next, examine the pet for any scratches or bite marks the skunk could have inflicted, including on the eyes, as these may require veterinary attention.

If the skunk spray reached your dog's face or head, place a cotton ball in each of your dog's ears to prevent the skunk odor-removing solution from coming into contact with the ear drum.

Bathe only the affected areas by soaking a cloth or sponge in the solution and saturating the affected areas. Rub the solution into the dog or cat's coat evenly. Avoid the eyes and mouth when doing this. Use a cloth to carefully wash the around the face and eyes if the pet has been sprayed in the face.

Leave the solution on the coat for approximately 10 minutes.

Thoroughly rinse with fresh water. Repeat once or twice as needed until the majority of the smell is gone.

Finally, wash the pet with a fresh-smelling dog or cat shampoo and conditioner. Rinse and dry completely.

## AFTERWARDS

It is common for the smell to become apparent again when the pet becomes wet, such as in the rain. This can occur on and off for 2-3 weeks, and then dissipates on its own.

## ALTERNATIVES AND THEIR RELATIVE MERITS

Tomato juice is also a good skunk scent remover when applied to the affected areas of the haircoat, but it is not as effective. Tomato juice has been largely replaced by the peroxide/soap/baking soda mixture described above.

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### *Does this happen again very often, or do dogs learn their lesson?*

Unfortunately, dogs are often “repeat offenders” with skunk spraying. Therefore, it is a good idea to prevent them from coming into contact with a skunk, and if that fails, to keep these instructions at hand.

### *Is there a health risk to my dog or cat with skunk spray?*

The greatest hazard under normal circumstances is spraying into the eyes. This can cause ocular irritation but virtually never causes permanent damage.

### *Don't skunks carry rabies?*

Yes, rabies is common in some populations of skunks in many parts of the world. Rabies is *not* spread through the spray of a

skunk, but a dog's being close enough to a skunk means the skunk could attack and bite the dog, and a penetrating (bite) injury does transmit rabies if the skunk is rabid. Therefore, prevention is the best approach: if you know skunks are nearby or can smell their scent in your neighborhood, you should keep your dog on a leash and cat indoors. If your pet has been scratched or bitten by any wild animal, and there is any concern regarding rabies infection, see a veterinarian immediately. If an animal suspected to have rabies is in your area, contact your local wildlife service provider.

Practice Stamp or Name & Address