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Hand rearing Joey possums

A Joey needs warmth, quiet, security and nourishment.

Stress

A newly orphaned Joey will be suffering from stress and shock as a result of the events leading to its rescue. Injuries such as bites, fractures will require immediate veterinary attention. Stress will be suffered as a result of separation from the mother, loss of warmth and loss of nourishment.

Make the Joey secure in a substitute pouch and warm it appropriately.

Leave the Joey alone until it has settled and restrict initial handling to one person.

Handling, particularly by children can be stressful and lead to death. Any cuddling or handling should be done with the Joey in the pouch, where it feels safe. The Joey needs the same care a premature baby and should not be treated as a cuddly toy.

Substitute pouches

Pouches are ideally made of soft washable material, such as blankets, sheets, jumpers and windcheaters. Avoid materials such as hessian and wool fleeces as joeys will suck and chew on these, ingesting pieces.

The Joey should be placed in a natural position in the pouch. The pouch should be just big enough to allow the Joey to move around in but keep it snug.

The joeys pouch will need to be kept inside a cat cage or secure cage.

The Joey will reach the stage when it is starting to emerge from the pouch, allow the Joey to enter and exit the pouch unaided as it wishes.

Heat source

A Joey is unable to regulate its own body temperature when young, so needs an external heat source. Until the Joey is well furred and can leave the pouch, a pouch temp of 30-32 degrees should be maintained. An electric mat placed under one end of the pouch is the most reliable method. If there isn't a thermostat, the correct temperature can be maintained by adding or removing layers of padding between the mat and the Joey. A thermometer should be placed with the Joey to allow checking that the temperature is maintained constantly.

It is possible to harm joeys by overheating them, so make sure the pouch temp is monitored. A Joey is unable to lower its temp by sweating although as it gets older it will lick its paws to cool off.

When warming up a cold Joey, this should be done slowly so as not to induce shock.

Diet

Marsupial milk changes in composition during lactation to provide the nourishment required for different stages of a joeys development.

Wombaroo milk replacer is recommended and the Joey should be weighted and measured to determine the age of the Joey and the correct stage and amount of milk to be fed. The milk should be mixed according to instructions and the amount strictly adhered to.

Before feeding warm the required amount of milk, checking the temp is lukewarm. Joeys should be fed in the pouch with a syringe and teat or catheter to reduce stress. If the Joey struggles at first, hold it securely into your body, cup your hand gently under its chin and over its eye. This usually quietens the Joey, making it easier to feed.

When the possum accepts milk easily, it can be introduced to the milk on a spoon or in a small container to lap from.

Teats

A Joey's mouth is easily damaged. It will need a small catheter on a syringe or a soft marsupial teat to avoid ulcers or irritations forming in the mouth.

Water

Joeys should be offered water from a young age. Milk replacers provide nourishment but it is probable that the Joey will also get thirsty. Do not mix the water with the milk but offer in-between feed

Cleanliness

Joeys are normally stimulated to defecate and urinate by their mother licking them. After each feed you will need to gently but firmly rub the genital area with a damp tissue to stimulate the Joey. A fully furred Joey may resist toileting and go in its pouch; the pouch will need to be changed regularly if this happens. If diarrhoea or bloating occurs seek advice from a qualified carer or veterinarian as the Joey can die very quickly from these conditions.

Pouches should be regularly changed.

Introducing solids

Furred joeys which are emerging from the pouch should be offered new leaves from native plants, (that have not been sprayed), apple, sweet potato, rolled oats and nuts.

The pouch should always be available for the Joey to return to in case it feels threatened or cold.

You will need to provide shelter and warmth for your Joey in an aviary when it gets older. Provide tree branches and hiding places for stimulation.

A possum's main diet should consist of a variety of native flora; this will keep a healthy gut flora.

Treats can be given in smaller amounts. These can consist of:

Apple, pear and most fruits. Carrot, sweet potato, corn, peanuts, almonds, sunflower seeds, boiled egg can also be given.

Troubleshooting

Diarrhoea

Newly acquired joeys can take 24-48 hrs to settle due to stress and adjusting to milk formula.

Once established on Wombaroo diarrhoea should not be a diet related problem unless being fed incorrect amounts. This is more likely to be stress related. Avoid chills, stress and handling by strangers. Once diarrhoea has started it can be difficult to stop. If it continues over 12 hrs seek professional help. Joeys may dehydrate and become seriously ill quickly.

Bloating

In the wild possums eat the faecal pellets that they produce overnight before they pass through their system a second time. This removes the last amount of nutritional value from the pellets and also provides good bacteria for their gut health. Baby possums will also eat their mum's pellets and this starts up a healthy gut balance for starting to eat solids. When joeys are hand raised they don't receive this opportunity and it is quite easy for their gut flora to get out of balance quickly. This can cause the Joey to bloat up with gas which can kill them very quickly.

Always start joeys off on native vegetation rather than fruits which are filled with sugars. If bloat occurs a feed product called Critical Care has been found to be successful in helping to correct this condition. It is important to seek advice from a vet or an experienced carer.

Illness

Wild animals do not show symptoms as plainly as cats and dogs and when they do it usually means they are very ill so immediate attention is needed. Symptoms may include loss of appetite, drinking less, weakness, falling over, bloating. Coughing or raspy breathing or anything different from normal behavior.

Antibiotics

Due to their intestinal gut flora, possums should never be given antibiotics by mouth only by injection

Castration

No matter how gentle he has been, a male possum can become aggressive.

Castration is advised before he is put out into an aviary. This is a veterinary procedure.

Possums are very territorial. Releasing a hand reared possum puts it at risk of death by starving from not knowing how to find appropriate foods and by being attacked by other wild possums defending their territory.

It is for these reasons, it is illegal to release hand reared native animals without consulting Dept. of Environment and Heritage to form a slow release plan.

Ringtail Possums

Under 60gms chances of survival are not good

80 – 100 gms chances of survival are good unless injured or in poor condition. Joey should have 5 feeds daily.

Native plant suggestions Eucalyptus leaves / flowers. Grevilleas. Bottlebrush leaves / flowers. Plus banana, apple rolled oats, sweet corn.

Brush tail Possums

Under 70gms

Unfurred, eyes closed. Chances of survival are not good. Must be lubricated after each feed to prevent dryness and cracking. This also helps prevent dehydration. Joey should be fed every 3 hours around the clock.

100gms plus

Fur covering is good. Eyes are open, survival chances are good. Joey should have 6 feeds a day.

200 – 300 gms

Decrease number of feeds to 5 daily (the same daily amount)

300gms

Reduce feeds to 4 times daily and offer solid food