

Be Safe

Whether you work at home or at a wildlife center your health and safety are always the first priority. If injured or sick, you cannot continue to rehabilitate wildlife and you put yourself, and your family, at risk as well.

Remember that the animals you work with are wild and can be dangerous. Think about that squirrel that can break open a macadamia nut and look at your fingers. There are many diseases that can be carried by animals either by their body fluids or parasites that they may carry. Some of these can be fatal and some can last a lifetime.

The number one injury to rehabilitators is to the fingers, hands and arms due to claws or bites. While gloves can protect you must remember that squirrels can bite through leather right down to your finger and bone with no problem. Make sure that your gloves fit and give you the dexterity you need to hold on to the animal. A loose animal can be very dangerous when cornered or trying to get away.

Masks can protect you against airborne diseases. Surgical masks have a low efficacy in preventing inhalation of particles so make sure that your mask fits you, is for the appropriate use and fits correctly.

Aprons or scrubs can protect against contamination of your clothes from fecal matter, urine and blood. This also helps prevent the spread of disease from one animal to another IF you change after working with ill animals. With squirrels this can be an important factor in treating coccidia.

Remember NOT to wear perfumes or scented lotions while working with animals. Some of these can smell like musk or other animal products or environmental things like flowers and plants and can trigger a reaction or response from the animal you are working with.

Watch for items that can get snagged in a cage when you lean over or even by an animal. Such things as loose or frayed clothing, or tassels or fringe, dangling scarves or necklaces, ring that can get caught in a cage or lock or an animals toenail need to be secured out of the way as does hair that falls over your eyes or down where it can be caught.

I recommend that everyone working with animals have a current tetanus shot. This means within the last 6 years. It is easy to get scratched or punctured by a cage or nail or get bit.

You can never wash your hands too much! You should be washing before and after handling any animal, after cleaning a cage, after handling dirty laundry, before and after feeding baby animals, before and after preparing food for any animal, before eating or drinking anything yourself, before and after using the restroom and if working at a center, before going home.

Usually plain soap and lots of water is sufficient. If working with a known ill animal you might want to use an antibacterial soap. The general rule is to sing the Happy Birthday song twice while washing hands.

Learn what the zoonotic diseases are that the species you are working with might carry and take proper precautions. Some common ones carried by squirrels would include Plague, Lyme Disease, Salmonella, West Nile Virus and Hantavirus. Know what is in your area. This can be done by checking with your local health department or even animal control. Know what the symptoms are and what the treatments are as well.

Proper restraint and control of an animal is most important. If you cannot safely do a procedure on your own, ask for help. This is vital not only for your safety but for the safety of the animal as well.