

Possum Pieces #1 – Pouch emergence

Individual 'orphaned' possums frequently come in to care at the pouch emergence stage of development. They are only at this stage for a couple of weeks but for joeys orphaned at this stage it can be a difficult stage for carers to manage. They are the possum version of pre-schoolers, showing early signs of independence, but still very reliant on mum for food and security.



There is no exact weight that determines this stage but, as the name suggests, it is between pouch-bound pinkie and fully-furred back-rider. These joeys end up in care because they are still very new at the back-riding caper and can't always hang on tightly enough, particularly if mum is spooked by something and takes off in a hurry. If there is danger she won't come back for a lost baby, and the joey is far too small to catch up with her. Left alone, a pouch-emergent orphan will not survive. Re-uniting is possible, but difficult. First you have to find the right mum. Then you have to wait for mum to come down for her bub. Remember these little ones are just coming out of the pouch and skills such as tree-climbing are not well developed. In reality, almost all lost pouch emergent young end up in care.

There are several features of the pouch emergence process that are important for wildlife carers to understand. These include physical, dietary, and 'emotional' characteristics. Just prior to pouch emergence, the young possum's eyes open fully. They are beginning to fur up when they first emerge, with short fur over their whole body. The fur is too short to provide sufficient warmth so they cling close to mum for both body heat and for security. They spend a decreasing amount of time in the pouch as their fur thickens but will continue to put their head in for a drink for some time. At this stage they spend the whole time



clinging to mum. It is not until they are well furred that they start to venture a little way from mum, but not too far.

Pouch emergence is a time of two significant dietary changes for the young possum. The first of these is a change in the composition of milk provided by the possum mum. The change is in the ratio between protein, lipids (fats), and

carbohydrate. This is reflected in the range of milk formulas offered by some companies. Supplements may be required if the formula being used does not accommodate these changes. At the same time, the young joey is beginning to eat leaf as a substantial part of their diet. This is particularly important for ringtails as they now need to establish the appropriate gut flora for digesting eucalyptus leaf. Providing pap (adult faeces or caecal contents) helps boost gut flora.

This can be a very stressful time for a newly orphaned joey. A pinkie that is appropriately cared for will go from a warm possum pouch to a warm artificial pouch without too much fuss. An emergent joey in the wild will crawl from the pouch and snuggle in mum's warm fur. In care, the joey will crawl from an artificial pouch into an open and possibly cool space with nothing to cling to. Carers often give a pouch-emergent joey a fluffy teddy to cling to, and keep them in a warm humidicrib. Using multiple layers of pouches can also be helpful. No matter how diligent the carer is in creating an environment close to the real thing, pouch-emergent joeys will inevitably cry throughout the night for their first few days in care. While I do not condone carting orphans around all day, often the best thing to do with a newly orphaned crying pouch-emergent possum joey is to secure them in a pouch and carry them on your body until they settle.

There are some extra factors to consider but pouch-emergent joeys are my favourite. They bond well with their new mum which makes management a little easier and quickly pair up or crèche with others of their species which seems to be the biggest boost to survival.