

Tail injuries in ringtail possums

A healthy ringtail possum tail should have a thick covering of fur on the top and sides, with bare pink skin on the underside. The end portion of the tail usually has cream-coloured fur but this is variable. The possum should be able to curl its own tail into a tight ring and support its own weight with its tail.



In the wild, a ringtail possum uses its prehensile tail as a fifth limb. When feeding on leaf above its head it will stand on its back legs and use its tail for balance. When feeding on food below, it will hang from its feet and/or tail. Ringtail possums make a drey for shelter and the materials for the drey are carried in the tail. The tail is a critically important part of ringtail life in the wild.

Tail injuries in can be caused by attacks by cats or dogs, being taken by native birds such as crows or magpies, or from being caught in rodent traps.

Assessing for a tail injury requires a veterinary examination and should include the following:

Temperature – a cold tail (compared to the rest of the body) may indicate poor blood circulation to the tail. Blood circulation to the tail could be the result of clinical shock or trauma.

Colour – the underside of the tail should be pale pink. Very white skin could indicate poor blood circulation due to trauma to the tail, or to other causes such as shock or rodenticide poisoning. Red/purple skin indicates bruising. Black indicates necrosis.



normal skin colour



heavy bruising, necrosis of tip

Shape – a ringtail possum’s tail should curl reflexively. When pulled straight there should be no kinks or bends.



Tail not being reflexively curled. This possum is ready for sleep and should instinctively pull his tail into the pouch.



Neither of these possum tails is misshapen, but the possum on the left is not curling his tail.

Movement – a possum should voluntarily curl its tail or wrap its tail around its body. There are other reasons why this may not happen, such as overall weakness or neurological trauma, but a possum that does not tuck its tail up should be checked for a tail injury.

Pain – ‘pinch’ the tip of tail. If there is no response, the animal is not feeling pain. There are two types of pain. Reflexive pain is where nerves run to the spinal cord and straight back down again, and the tail is quickly pulled away from the source of pain. Deep pain is a brain response. Nerves run from the tail to the brain and the possum may respond in a more ‘cognitive’ way by crying in pain or swiping at the source of pain to remove it.

Radiographs – When radiographs are taken, include up to the sacral area. Look for fractures in individual vertebrae, vertebrae out of alignment, and uneven gaps between vertebrae. Uneven gaps between the vertebrae may result from a pull injury and nerve damage is likely to have occurred.

Treatment – Treatment for tail injuries should always be decided by a veterinarian. Fractures usually result in immediate euthanasia. Pull injuries may be treated in some cases, but the outcome is quite often euthanasia. Soft tissue damage or temporary nerve damage from swelling may be treated with anti-inflammatories.

Outcomes – Tail injuries in ringtail possums almost always end in euthanasia. A ringtail possum is arboreal and their tail is prehensile – it is used as a fifth limb. Without a fully functioning, full length tail a ringtail will not be able to carry nest material to make a drey. Their ability to balance while using both front feet to eat, or to feed from a hanging position will be severely compromised. They must be released with a full-length, fully functioning tail.

Further examples of tail injuries.



This possum was attacked by native birds and sustained a form of crush injury to its tail. The marks shown in the photo on the left were not significant, but the photo on the right shows the beak mark where the tail was grabbed hard enough to damage nerves, and possibly bones in the possum's tail.

This possum was treated with anti-inflammatory and pain relief but use of the



tail was not regained and the possum was euthanased.