

Virginia Opossum Neonate Thermometer Use

AT A GLANCE

- Normal body temperature of Virginia opossums is 94-96° Fahrenheit.
- Babies weighing under 150 grams are likely too small for use of typical rectal thermometers without causing injury.
- Flexible-tip oral thermometers are a feasible alternative to rectal thermometers and should allow accurate temperature readings.
- Testing the accuracy of oral thermometers before trusting their readings is advised.
- Thermometers of this type are available at most pharmacies.

Background

Normal body temperature for the Virginia opossum, *Didelphis virginiana*, is approximately 94-96° Fahrenheit. Because so many juveniles are lost each year to unidentified infections and for other root causes, using temperature as an indicator of health is crucial for rehabilitators.

It has come to our attention that many rehabilitators are struggling with taking body temperatures of baby opossums weighing approximately 150 grams or less for simple mechanical reasons (the thermometers are too big, and the babies are too small). Concern with hurting the infants and possibly causing internal damage is inhibiting rehabilitators' ability to effectively identify and monitor infections and other critical health threats their babies may be facing. To combat this issue, Sanctuari has looked into some alternatives to traditional rectal thermometers which could safely be used on opossum babies of various sizes.

Recommendations

According to one veterinarian affiliate, infants too small for rectal thermometer use can have their temperatures taken orally using a thermometer like the one pictured on the next page:



Sample flexible-tip thermometer

The flexible tip should allow delicate contact with infants' mouths, ensuring no injury is inflicted, while still giving an accurate temperature reading. Infrared and other non-contact thermometers are not a good choice for this species, as an opossum's fur can prevent accurate readings. Taking readings of ears and tails is not a feasible option, either, because these body parts will not reflect an accurate core temperature.

Infants of any species can be squirmy, and the thermometer is unlikely to stay in one place or exactly under the tongue. It may be a good idea to test the oral thermometer method with an adult whose temperature you can correlate with a separate rectal reading. There are multiple methods for correlating these types of readings, but in the simplest case, if the two thermometers give similar readings, you should be able to accurately take your babies' temperatures using the oral method.

Flexible-tip thermometers are often conveniently available at a local pharmacy or can be ordered online. If you attempt to adopt this method, or if you have another demonstrably reliable method for taking accurate neonate temperatures, we would of course be interested in your input.

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