

There are two sure-fire ways to avoid the pungent smell of a skunk: don't get into areas where skunks may live, but if you do, for goodness sakes don't get sprayed.

When those two factors collide, humans and pets usually get the short end of the deal.

"It's certainly a better idea to prevent the problem than to try to deal with the after effects," said Charlie Lee, a wildlife specialist with K-State Research and Extension.

It is rare for a healthy skunk to bite a human. However, one that is exhibiting active signs of rabies – aggressiveness, seizures or stumbling, to name a few – may be more inclined to bite and could transmit the disease to humans or animals.

More common, however, is that a skunk will try to chase away a predator or encroaching human by spraying a yellow-tinted, oily liquid – called a musk -- stored in two sacs near the anus of the animal.

"Each sac has about a teaspoon of musk, which is enough for multiple sprays," Lee said. "The musk is discharged through nipples that help skunks target those things they are trying to repel. Each nipple has its own musk sac, so a skunk can shoot with both barrels, and they can discharge the musk in a mist or a stream."

The musk cannot transmit the rabies virus, Lee said, but it can temporarily blind or stun individuals if they are sprayed in the face.

While the health effects of being sprayed by a skunk are minimal, it is nonetheless unpleasant to rid hair, clothes and body of the bitter smell. Lee said the following mixture, discovered by chemist Paul Krebaum, has been shown to be effective:

- 1 quart of 3% hydrogen peroxide.
- ¼ cup of baking soda.
- 1 teaspoon of liquid detergent.

"Mix those three ingredients in an open container and use it immediately," he said. "Do not mix these ingredients in advance because when oxygen is released, the container can explode."

The mixture can be used on people and pets, but Lee cautioned users to avoid splashing it in the eyes or mouth. On pets, allow the mixture to sit for five minutes before rinsing.

For inanimate objects – surfaces, decks, chairs and other outside objects – Lee suggested a mixture of 1 cup of liquid laundry bleach and 1 gallon of water. "Be aware that bleach may stain surfaces," he said.

Lee added that some of the effective commercial products available in many stores include Skunk-Off, Odormute, Fresh Wave, Epoleon N-100 and Neutroleum Alpha.

"Neutroleum Alpha is one that has been used to control odor from skunks in a variety of settings," Lee said. "It deodorizes by masking the odor with a different one that is described as

minty or pleasant. You can use it directly on surfaces or it can be used as an air deodorizer by placing it on paper towels or napkins and then hanging them in the area.”

Lee noted that one home remedy thought to work is probably not what folks think it is: “Tomato juice is not something I recommend,” he said. “It appears to be only marginally effective.”

“There are a lot of products out there that will help consumers through a difficult or uncomfortable situation. Keep in mind that at times when humidity is high or it rains, the odor will appear to come back. In those times, simply re-apply the product.”

Alicia Boor is an Agriculture and Natural Resources agent in the Cottonwood District (which includes Barton and Ellis counties) for K-State Research and Extension. You can contact her by e-mail at aboer@ksu.edu or calling 620-793-1910.