



Introduction to Ferret Care

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Ferrets are wonderful pets. They tend to be very gentle and playful, but they are very curious and can get into trouble when left unattended. They do have some additional care needs compared to other small pets. This guide will outline basic care and provide a few tips for preventing common medical issues.

Housing

Ferrets are extremely curious and mischievous! They love to chew and are very good at it. They should be kept in an appropriate cage when they cannot be supervised. An appropriate ferret cage is large in size, with multiple levels, and narrow cage bars. The cage should have a sturdy top and a quality latching system on the doors. The Midwest Ferret Nation cage is a good option.

There are many toys suitable for ferrets made of cloth, hard rubber, or plastic. Take care to ensure that the toys do not contain small parts which your ferret can swallow. Ferrets will play with, and try to eat, many unsafe objects. Be sure to keep small objects such as earplugs (used for sleeping) and pencil erasers out of their reach.

The rooms where your ferrets are allowed to roam should be ferret-proofed. You will need to hide electrical wires, section off upholstered furniture (so they do not eat the stuffing), and be sure that there are no escape routes, such as doors that do not close tightly or broken screens. Avoid using reclining chairs when ferrets are in the room, as they can climb into the frame.



Diet

Ferrets are true carnivores (meat-eaters) and require a diet that is high in fat and protein from animal sources. An ideal meal for a ferret is a whole mouse, however; many owners are reluctant to feed such a meal. The next best choice is Primal Raw brand cat food or Primal Dehydrated cat food. There are many varieties and flavors, but meat over fish is ideal. We have these foods at the hospital to try.

Wysong also makes a dehydrated raw ferret food, and kibble variety, which are high in quality. The next best option is a high-quality grain-free cat or kitten food. Some high protein brands include Petcurean NOW and Nature's Variety Instinct.

Ferrets should have little or no carbohydrates. It is important to stay away from all grains and starches with ferrets. Large amounts of carbohydrates and starches can predispose your ferret to illness.

Treats should be strictly meat-based like dehydrated chicken, beef, venison, rabbit (examples). Be sure to read the label to ensure that they contain no grains. Fresh protein sources like chicken and turkey are perfectly acceptable as long as they are cooked properly.

Bathing

Ferrets can be bathed. If you start them young, your ferret may even enjoy it. A mild scented, soap-free pet shampoo is best. Keep the shampoo and water away from the eyes and ears. Hold your ferret by the scruff to keep them stable while rinsing in a shallow sink of warm water. Make sure that your ferret does not become chilled. Give her a towel, and she will usually dry herself. This is really fun to watch!

Vaccines

Ferrets should be vaccinated for canine distemper. Canine distemper is a virus that can cause serious diseases in ferrets. Fortunately there is a vaccine manufactured specifically for ferrets that will prevent this disease. It is important that your ferret receives this vaccine and not the one manufactured for dogs. Juvenile ferrets should receive a series of 2 distemper vaccinations 3-4 weeks apart. Adult ferrets should receive an annual booster thereafter.

Ferrets should also be vaccinated yearly for the rabies virus. Rabies is a fatal disease in all mammals. Although your ferret may never go outdoors, vaccination will protect them from quarantine should they bite someone. Your ferret will also be protected against the fatal virus if they are ever exposed to it. There have been several case reports of cats being bit by bats inside of homes. Even if your ferret never goes outside, it is important (and required by law) that they are vaccinated for rabies.

Heartworm

Heartworm disease is caused by a parasite that is carried by mosquitos and spread through mosquito bites. Ferrets do not contract heartworm as easily as dogs, however, the infection can occur. Ferrets should be given monthly heartworm preventative. We recommend a product called Revolution, which is a topical medication. This medication also deworms and prevents flea and mite infestations. If your ferret does not tolerate topical application, there are other oral options. We carry different varieties of heartworm prevention in our hospital.

Dental Disease

Ferrets have teeth that need to be brushed just like a cat or a dog. Human toothpaste is NOT safe for ferrets. Instead, use toothpaste like CET which is enzymatic and flavored. Slowly introduce the toothpaste as a treat (a small amount daily). Then, begin wiping it on their teeth so they get used to the texture and flavor. Once they tolerate this, try introducing a toothbrush and brush their teeth daily. When tartar and plaque build-up, they will need their teeth cleaned. Most ferrets will require yearly dental cleanings.

Hairballs

Hairballs can be very serious for ferrets (much more serious than in cats). To prevent hairballs, brush your ferret daily. Be sure to feed an optimal diet, as outlined above.

Human Colds/Flu

Ferrets are very susceptible to human colds and flu. Do not get close to your ferret when you are ill. When there is a person with a cold/flu in the house, watch your ferret for sneezing, runny eyes/nose, diarrhea, decreased activity, or decreased appetite. If you notice these symptoms, please call and schedule an appointment.

Signs of Disease

Call us if you notice any of the following signs of disease:

- Sneezing
- Runny eyes/nose
- Decreased appetite/activity
- Labored breathing
- Bloody or black stools
- Decreased stool production
- Straining to urinate or defecate

- fever
- Lack of coordination
- Itchy skin/ears

While these are some of the most common signs of illness in ferrets, other signs to watch for include hair loss, lethargy, and falling over. If your ferret starts to lose fur or appears to have a swollen vulva (females) or difficulty urinating (males), he or she likely has adrenal disease. If your ferret has episodes of collapse or weakness, especially in the hind legs, they likely have an insulinoma (tumor of the pancreas).

Please bring any problems to our attention right away. The sooner we are able to diagnose the problem, the better chances we have of successful treatment.

Preventive Care

Ferrets are prone to many diseases. With ferrets under 3 years of age, we recommend yearly examinations and blood tests. As ferrets age, they become prone to several serious diseases, including insulinoma, lymphoma, heart disease, and adrenal disease. Most ferrets will develop at least one of these diseases by the time they are 3–4 years old. Many ferrets will develop more than one of these diseases in their lifetime. After 3 years of age, we recommend routine examinations and bloodwork every 6 months. Blood testing will help to spot these problems early when treatment is most likely to be successful. It is best to plan for this when your ferret is still young.

Deslorelin or Lupron implants decrease the hormone that causes adrenal disease. We recommend implants if your ferret has been tested for adrenal disease and shows supportive clinical and laboratory signs. Implants are administered typically every 9–18 months depending on your ferret's clinical signs. This is a very brief procedure that does require sedation.

Fecal exams (test run from a stool sample) are very important in younger ferrets, and ferrets that have contact with other ferrets. This test will check for communicable intestinal parasites.

Human Bites

Ferrets have been blamed for inflicting bites on people (especially infants). This is a very controversial topic. There is no proof that ferret bites occur more frequently than with other species of pets. However, to be safe, never allow children to play with ferrets unsupervised.