

Introduction to Ferret Care

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Ferrets are wonderful pets. They tend to be very gentle and playful pets but are extremely curious and often get into trouble if left unattended. Taking proper care of your ferret will result in a healthier and longer life for your pet. This handout will outline some of the basics of ferret care and provide a few tips for preventing some of the more commonly seen problems.

Diet

Ferrets need access to fresh, clean water at all times. Water bottles are preferred because they are less messy and safer than a bowl or crock. Ferrets are true carnivores (meat eaters) and require a diet that is high in fat and protein from animal sources. They should have little or no carbohydrates. 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 cat food or Primal Dehydrated cat food. There are many variety and flavors, ideally stick with the meat based over the fish based. We have these in stock at the the hospital to try. Wysong also makes a dehydrated raw ferret food that is high quality. The next option is canned high quality cat or kitten food which is grain free. Some brands that have very high protein include Petcurean NOW, Nature's Variety Instinct and Wysong Epigen canned ferret food. The final option is kibble ferret food like Wysong Epigen and high quality kibble cat foods like Nature's Variety Instinct. These are very high in protein and are grain free. It is extremely important to stay away from ALL grains and starches with ferrets. Large amounts of starches and carbohydrates can predispose your ferret to illness. Treats for ferrets should be strictly meat based like dehydrated chicken, beef, venison, rabbit (examples) and make sure these also contain no grains (read the label). Feeding fresh protein sources like chicken and turkey are perfectly acceptable as long as they are cooked properly.

Vaccines

Ferrets should be vaccinated for canine distemper and rabies. Canine distemper is a virus that can cause serious disease in ferrets. Fortunately there is a vaccine manufactured specifically for ferrets that will prevent the disease. It is important that your ferret receive this vaccine and not 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 once every year for the rabies virus. Rabies is a fatal disease in all mammals. Although your ferret may never go outdoors, it is important that he be vaccinated. Vaccination will protect him from quarantine should he bite someone. It will also protect him from contracting this fatal disease should he ever be exposed to it. There have been several case reports of cats being bit by rabid bats inside of a person's home. So even if your ferret never goes outside, it is still important (and required by law) to have him vaccinated for rabies.

Heartworm

Heartworm disease is caused by a parasite that is carried by mosquitoes and is spread through mosquito bites. Ferrets do not get heartworm as easily as dogs, however infection can occur. Ferrets should be given heartworm preventative. We recommend Revolution topical monthly. It can be purchased at our hospital. This medication also deworms and prevents flea infestations from occurring. If your ferret does not tolerate the topical application, please ask us about other oral options.

Caging

Ferrets are extremely curious and mischievous! They love to chew and are very good at it. When not supervised, all ferrets should be kept in an appropriate cage. Rooms where ferrets are allowed to roam should be ferret-proofed. Electrical wires should be hidden or covered so they can't be chewed. The bottoms of stuffed furniture should be covered with heavy paper or cardboard so they can't climb up into the furniture or eat the stuffing. Be sure there is no escape route (doors that don't close tightly, broken screens, etc.). They may attack birds, rodents, lizards, etc. Do not use reclining chairs when ferrets are in the room. There are many toys suitable for ferrets made of cloth, hard rubber or plastic. ALWAYS BE SURE THERE ARE NO SMALL PARTS YOUR FERRET CAN SWALLOW!! Keep ear plugs (that people wear at night to sleep) locked up and away from your ferret. These are very enticing for ferrets to eat. Also, tops of pencil erasers should also be kept out of ferret reach!

Dental Disease

Ferrets have teeth and need them brushed just like a cat or a dog. Human toothpaste is NOT safe for ferrets. Please choose pet toothpaste like CET that is enzymatic and flavored. By slowly introducing the toothpaste as a treat (a small amount daily) and then wiping it on their teeth for several days will get them used to the texture and flavor. Once they like this try introducing a toothbrush and brush their teeth daily. When tartar and plaque buildup they will need their teeth cleaned. Most ferrets require yearly dental cleanings.

Hairballs

Hairballs can be very serious for ferrets (much more serious than in cats). To prevent hair balls, brush your ferret daily and make sure you are feeding an optimal diet outlined above.

Bathing

Ferrets may be bathed. If you start when your ferret is young they may even enjoy the experience. A mild scent and soap free pet shampoo is recommended. Holding them by the scruff is a good way to keep them stable while rinsing them in a shallow sink of warm water. As with all creatures, keep the shampoo and water away from eyes and ears. Make sure that your pet does not become chilled. Give your ferret a towel, she will usually dry herself! This is really fun to watch!

Human Colds/Flu

Ferrets are very susceptible to human colds and flu. Do not get close to your ferret when you have a cold. When there is a person with a cold in the house, watch your ferret for sneezing, runny eyes/nose, diarrhea, decreased activity or decreased appetite. Call us if you notice any of these signs.

Examinations/Blood Tests

Ferrets are prone to many diseases. When ferrets are under 3 years of age, we recommend yearly examinations and blood tests. As ferrets age, they are prone to several serious diseases (insulinoma, lymphoma, heart disease and adrenal disease). Most ferrets will come down with at least one of these diseases by the time they are 3 or 4 years old; many ferrets will have more than one of these diseases during their lifetime. So after 3 years of age, we recommend examinations every 6 months. Blood testing also helps to spot these problems early when treatment is likely to be more successful.

Ferrets 1-3 years of age should have a complete blood count (CBC) and blood profile once every year. Ferrets older than 3 years should have these tests every 6 months. The cost is approximately \$70 for both tests. It is best to plan ahead for this while your ferret is still young. If finances dictate, the testing can be done less frequently but the above recommendations are designed to provide the best care possible for your pet.

Fecal Exam

Fecal exams are very important in younger ferrets and in ferrets that have contact with other ferrets. Please bring a stool sample with you when you come for your exam, especially if your ferret is experiencing diarrhea.

Signs of Disease

Sneezing, runny eyes or nose, decreased appetite or activity, labored breathing, bloody or black stools, decreased stool production, straining to urinate or defecate and fever are some of the more common signs of illness. Other signs to watch for include hair loss, lethargy or falling over. Call us if you notice any of these in your pet.

If your ferret starts to lose fur, or appears to have a swollen vulva (females) or a difficult time urinating (males), he or she most likely has adrenal disease. If your pet has episodes of collapse or weakness and lethargy, particularly weakness in the hind legs, she most likely has an insulinoma.

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

Human Bites

Ferrets have been blamed for inflicting bites on people (especially infants). This is a very controversial topic. There is no proof that this occurs more frequently than seen with other animals. However, to be safe, never allow children to play with your ferrets while unsupervised.

For More Information

1. A Practical Guide to Ferret Care By Deborah Jeans
2. Ferrets In Your Home By Wendy Winstead
3. Biology and Disease of the Ferret By Dr. James Fox
4. American Ferret Association, Inc: www.ferret.org