



CARING FOR YOUR FERRET

GENERAL INFORMATION: Ferrets are small slender animals related to otters, minks, skunks and weasels. They are generally friendly with pets and people. The domestic ferret is not a wild animal and will only survive in captivity. Various color forms are available. Ferrets often shed their coat in Spring and Fall, with the summer coat being shorter and darker than the winter coat. Body fat may increase dramatically in winter (up to 30% weight gain seasonally). Ferrets tend to be nocturnal but readily adapt to the owner's schedule. They are playful for most of their lives, and may chase or jump at feet as people pass by. Play biting is common in baby ferrets but can quickly be controlled. True biters are rare; aggression is more common in dogs than ferrets. The ferrets' small size (1-5 lb) makes them easily injured by dogs or children, so adult monitoring is recommended. They are carnivores, and like dogs & cats should not be left unattended around infants. Ferrets will learn to use a litter box but are not as reliable as cats in this regard.

QUICK FACTS: Life span: 7-9 years (rarely to 11+) Age to adult weight: 4 months Adult teeth erupt: 6-8 weeks
Age to breeding: 5-9 months Pregnancy length: 42 days Litter size: average = 8 Weaning age: 5 ½ -8 weeks

HANDLING: Ferrets may be picked up around the midsection; never hold them by a leg or tail without supporting the body. With baby ferrets you may need to train them to play gently; if the ferret grabs a finger and does not let go, you may flick the tip of the nose with a finger (avoid the eyes!) to get your pet to release. Holding a ferret by the scruff (the skin at the back of the neck) will relax your pet and reduce wiggling during nail trimming or ear cleaning.

HOUSING: Ferrets usually are housed in a wire cage when not supervised. They often sleep much of the day and awaken when the owner is around. They may be allowed to roam in the house with supervision. Their environment should be free of hazards. Ferrets like to chew (and swallow) pieces of rubbery items such as rubber toys, ear plugs, shoe soles, rubber mats, etc. These should be kept out of reach. Ferrets like to dig in dirt, so potted plants may need to be out of reach. Ferrets are not great climbers but can climb rough cloth surfaces such as on sofas. They can fit into small spaces, so may disappear into small holes in a wall or floor. They may be injured when exploring in or under appliances such as dishwashers or clothes dryers, or when caught in a recliner mechanism. Ideally fit your ferret with a collar and small bell to help track your ferret's location; this also identifies a lost ferret as a pet to anyone who finds it. Slip the collar over the head already buckled to avoid over-tightening. Identification may be printed on the collar. A pet microchip inserted under the skin yields permanent identification of your pet; animal shelters scan pets for chips.

DIET: Ferrets are carnivores and need a high protein diet. Dry kibble ferret foods are available; the best are probably the newer high protein (50-52%) + low starch kibbles such as Pretty Pets Natural Gold, or Wysong Epigen-90 ("Digestive") for ferrets. Some feline diabetic diets are low-carb and match ferrets' needs quite well; these are Purina D-M and Hills M/D feline; both are prescription diets. These newer formulas may help reduce or prevent some common diseases such as insulinomas & inflammatory bowel disease. Not all 'low carb' formulas are good; avoid diets that are 'grain free' but include fruits or peas (these are unhealthy ingredients for ferrets). Avoid nut or fruit mix diets, and minimize sweet treats or milk products. Ferretvite and Ferretone supplements should be avoided. A healthy treat is an omega-3 fatty acid supplement such as salmon oil or krill oil; puncture a capsule and squeeze out a few drops of liquid daily. Ferrets may usually be fed free choice, as obesity is uncommon unless they eat soft food. Provide fresh water at all times; use a water bottle or very heavy bowl, as ferrets dig in water bowls and spill or soil the water frequently. Clean water bowls daily.

MEDICAL CARE: Home care may include nail trimming every 3-4 weeks, and cleaning the ears with a cotton swab if dark wax builds up inside. Bathing is optional but may reduce the ferret's moderate musky odor. Veterinary care is important. Canine distemper vaccine should be given at 8, 11 & 14 weeks of age and then annually; Purevax (Merial) is approved for ferrets. Rabies vaccine is given at 12-14 weeks of age and then annually; a good approved brand is Imrab-3 (Rhone Merieux). Most ferrets have been neutered & "descented" (anal sacs removed) before sale; if this has not been done then have your ferret neutered at 5-6 months old. Neutering or spaying reduces odor dramatically and eliminates severe reproductive diseases in the females. Descenting is optional but helps reduce odor a little more. Regular veterinary visits are important to detect health problems. Annual visits for exam and vaccines are recommended for ferrets 1- 4 years old; exams may be done every 6 months on ferrets over 4 years old. An annual blood profile in ferrets over 4 years old helps detect common diseases before they become too advanced. Hormone implants (Deslorelin) should be given once yearly after 3 years old, to prevent adrenal cancer in aging ferrets.

DISEASE CONDITIONS:

EAR MITES: These are small spider-like parasites which live in the ears of ferrets, dogs or cats; they are contagious via shared bedding or direct contact. Ferrets often show fewer signs of itching than dogs, but may have heavy black wax in the ears. Normal ferrets may produce wax also, so microscopic examination of the exudate is needed to identify the mites. Treatment is with ear drops or oral / injectable medication.

FLEAS: Ferrets may also share these parasites with dogs & cats. Flea treatment involves topical flea products on the ferret, and treating the house environment as well. Advantage drops have been found safe and effective; use caution not to overdose these small pets with a flea product.

RESPIRATORY INFECTIONS: Ferrets are susceptible to some human flu viruses; symptoms are similar to those in humans. No treatment is usually necessary unless signs are severe. Avoid close contact when you or your ferret has a cold, as it may spread from human to pet or vice versa.

CANINE DISTEMPER VIRUS: This is a deadly viral disease of dogs, ferrets and wildlife (foxes, raccoons, etc). Signs include nasal and eye discharge, chin rash, weakness, weight loss, hard crusty foot pads, and neurologic signs such as seizures, aggression, stupor and coma. Nearly all cases are fatal within 10 days. There is no treatment; prevent this disease with vaccination

ALEUTIAN DISEASE: This is a viral disease of mink that sometimes infects ferrets. Many ferrets seem resistant to it, and of the few who become infected, many remain non-symptomatic. In a few cases serious symptoms may develop and can include weight loss, dark tarry stools, respiratory distress (viral pneumonia), kidney problems, eye problems, and occasionally encephalitis (brain disease). There is no vaccine or cure; suspected cases may be confirmed via blood testing. Isolation of affected animals may help reduce spread of the disease.

GASTRIC FOREIGN BODIES: Ferrets like to chew and swallow rubber items, which often lodge in the stomach or bowel. Ferrets also can develop hairballs in the stomach. Stomach foreign bodies may be non-symptomatic, or can cause tooth grinding, nausea, vomiting, decreased appetite, weight loss, and tarry black stools. If the object blocks the bowel, signs are immediate and severe and include depression, weakness, vomiting and appetite loss. Bowel blockage is a medical emergency; treatment is via surgical removal. Prevent this problem via avoidance of rubber items which the ferret may chew on. Hairballs may be prevented with oral medication such as Laxatone; also brush or pluck loose hair during times of heavy shedding (Spring & Fall usually).

INSULINOMAS: These are small tumors in the pancreas, most common in ferrets over 3-4 years old. The tumors secrete excess insulin, lowering the blood sugar. Signs are weakness, inactivity, drooling, acting dazed, and sometimes coma or seizures. Oral sugar (Karo syrup) often produces temporary improvement in a hypoglycemic animal. The best treatment is surgical removal of the tumors, but medical therapy may control symptoms for many months. Risk of these tumors may be reduced by feeding high-protein low-carbohydrate diets such as listed on the first page.

ADRENAL TUMORS: These are common mostly in ferrets over 3 years old. The tumors produce excess adrenal hormones, mostly estrogen & testosterone. Signs include hair loss, itching, weight loss, changes in odor or aggression, swollen vulva in females, and difficulty urinating in males. Cure is via surgical removal of the tumor. Medication (Lupron or Deslorelin) may improve symptoms, but does not stop the tumor from growing. Deslorelin implants can prevent adrenal tumors in ferrets; the hormone implants are injected under the skin and last at least 12 months. Implants should be given yearly to all ferrets over 3 years old; treated ferrets often have better hair coats and a younger, healthier appearance. Adrenal tumors are rare if implants are used prior to cancer development.

LYMPHOMA: This is a fairly common lymph node cancer in ferrets, and may occur in animals as young as 12 months old, but is more common in ferrets over 2 years old. The most common form occurs in the abdominal lymph nodes, and often appears to be linked to stomach & bowel disease. Detection and control of inflammatory bowel disease may reduce risk of lymphoma in ferrets. Signs of lymphoma may include weight loss, anemia, large lymph nodes, fluid in the thorax or abdomen, or abdominal masses. Diagnosis is usually via biopsy of any detected masses. Therapy is medical; surgery rarely cures lymphoma. Cortisone may slow the tumors and prolong life. More aggressive chemotherapy may halt the disease in some ferrets. This cancer is eventually fatal in most cases.

STOMACH & INTESTINAL DISEASES: There are many causes of weight loss, diarrhea, vomiting, or appetite loss in ferrets, including **Inflammatory Bowel Disease** (very common), coronavirus, Helicobacter gastritis (rare), stomach ulcers, etc. Coronavirus may be carried by baby ferrets without symptoms, but may make older ferrets ill when the baby is introduced; signs include nausea and greenish diarrhea within days of exposure. Use caution when mixing older and younger ferrets. Ferret digestive diseases often appear clinically mild, with few signs other than a gradual loss of body weight & muscle, but if untreated may lead to fatal complications, including hepatitis, ulcers, megaesophagus, or lymphoma. Treatment depends on the specific disease. Accurate diagnosis of digestive diseases starts with a thorough history and exam, a blood profile, and a fecal analysis. Many cases need biopsy of the stomach or bowel to confirm a diagnosis. Most digestive disease is curable or controllable, and affected animals can live long, happy lives.