



Care of Ferrets



Ness Exotic Wellness Center

1007 Maple Ave.

Lisle, IL 60532

630-737-1281

Introduction

Ferrets are fun-loving critters that capture your heart, stimulate your imagination, keep you on your toes and give you unconditional love for years to come. A ferret's sense of joy, ability to make each waking moment a new adventure and its strong will are immeasurable.

The pet ferret (*Mustela putorius furo*) is the only domesticated member of the weasel family Mustelidae. They were originally used for rodent control and to hunt rabbits. Most ferrets today are kept in the house or in outdoor enclosures as pets. Wild members of this family include mink, otters, badgers and the endangered North American black-footed ferret.

Ferrets are small, quiet, fastidious and incredibly social. Best of all, you can raise them as comfortably in a one-room apartment as in a house.

Ferrets have an average lifespan of five (5) to seven (7) years. Baby ferrets are called kits. They reach adult weight around 4 to 6 months of age and will attain maximum body size at six months. Spayed females are called sprites; neutered males are gibs. The adult female usually weighs from 3/4 to 2 pounds, the adult male a little more, from 2 to 3 1/2 pounds.

Diet

Ferrets are strict carnivores, meaning they are designed to eat whole prey items. They have a very short gastrointestinal (GI) tract; it takes about 3 to 4 hours for food to go from one end to the other. Because of the short GI tract and the poor absorption of nutrients, ferrets require a diet that is highly concentrated with FAT as the main source of calories (energy) and highly digestible MEAT BASED PROTEIN. The ferret diet should contain at least 30 – 40% crude protein and 15 – 20% fat. The protein should be of animal origin and highly digestible. Ferrets should never be fed carbohydrates (such as vegetables, fruits, or grains) as the main source of their diet. Ferrets cannot digest fiber that is found in vegetables and fruit. The flora (the organisms living in the GI tract) found in a ferrets GI tract are very simple, unlike the flora of animals that eat more vegetation.

Supplements

- Omega Fatty Acid Supplements – Occasionally ferrets can develop a dry hair coat or dry skin and may benefit from the use of an oral fatty acid supplement. Coat or dry skin can be due to lack of sufficient fat in the diet or a very dry environment. Dry itchy skin can also be a clinical sign of adrenal disease. Fish oils provide an excellent source of omega fatty acids that are beneficial for this dry skin issue, as well as providing other health benefits from anti-inflammation to supporting heart health. A veterinarian should be consulted for the proper use of the fatty acid supplement.
- Treat Foods – Most commercial treats are high in carbohydrates and can actually cause health risks to your pet. Humans have the emotional needs to provide their pet treats. Your ferret will not be offended if they are not offered a treat from you. If you must give a treat try to find treats that are high in digestible protein and fat just like their diet should be.
- Hairball Laxative – Hairball laxatives are generally made up of petroleum and a sweetener. It is best to give these products minimally to your ferret. Place a pea-sized amount of your ferret's food every third day. If they won't take the laxative, try putting it on the ferret's front feet and he/she will naturally lick it off to keep clean.

Environment

- Caging and Exercise – Ferrets should NEVER be caged 24 hours a day. Like all animals they need exercise to develop strong muscles and bones, to keep physically fit and for their mental health. Ferrets have the physiology of a predator; they will play intensely for 1 hour and sleep deeply for several hours. Ferrets are normally more active at dusk and dawn but will adjust to their owners waking and sleeping cycle to be awake and ready for play when you are. The *minimum* size cage for TWO ferrets is 3 feet x 3 feet x 2 feet. The cage can be multilevel, but one level cages are best for ferrets since they are not natural climbers and as they age they will have a harder and harder time moving up to the higher levels. Your cage should also have narrow slats along the walls and ceilings so that your ferret can not get out of the cage. Just remember that if your ferret's head can get through the rest will surely follow! Also make sure that the floor of the cage is solid. This is the optimal flooring for a ferret cage. Cages with wire mesh squares on the bottom have a tendency to cause foot injuries. If the cage does happen to have squares make sure that they are no larger than ¼" to prevent your little buddy's foot from going through. Aquariums are NOT suitable cages for ferrets due to the lack of air circulation in the cage.
- Ferrets should be allowed out for a minimum of two hours a day in a supervised, ferret-proofed area. This play time can be all at once or split between two and three times a day. When ferret-proofing an area get down on your hands and knees and see

what your ferret sees. If it looks like something they may want burrow into, climb on, crawl over, chew on or pull around ~ move it or pick it up. Make sure to remove any toxic substances such as plants, household cleaners, insecticides, rodenticides or chocolate. Protect your carpet from digging by placing heavy plastic carpet protectors. Protect underneath your furniture and mattresses by covering these areas with a solid piece of plywood or Plexiglas. The burrowing is not only damaging to your furniture and carpet, but the ferret can eat the foam rubber or carpets pieces and develop a fatal intestinal obstruction. Recliner chairs are another potential death trap for a ferret. Ferrets love to climb into the chairs to play and sleep and when the chair is moved into the reclining position, the ferret can be crushed. So either move the chair out of the area your ferrets will be playing or make sure to check the chair very thoroughly before sitting in it! Your ferrets also will continually try to find their way under your feet and between your feet. This is one of their favorite past times. You need to be extremely careful as to not step on them. You will find as time goes by your will be doing the “ferret shuffle” which is what you do to prevent yourself from stepping on your little fuzzies.

- Sleeping Area – Ferrets in the wild sleep in burrows underground, which is why you will notice that your ferret likes to sleep “burrowed” down into their bedding. Ferrets enjoy sleeping in soft towels, old shirts, sleep sacks, hammocks. Anything that is soft and cozy where they can feel safe will make them happy.
- Litter Box – Ferrets can be trained to use the litter box most of the time. For whatever reason, occasionally some just do not comply. With these reluctant ones try using newspaper or a different type of pan. A pan with a high-sided back is the best design to be used with ferrets. Ferrets should have a pelleted litter used in their box such as Yesterdays News or Feline Pine. Clumping or clay litter should not be used with ferrets since it is dusty and can be irritating to their respiratory system and the dust can be damaging to their fur. Ferrets do not cover up their waste so it will be necessary to clean the litter box daily and change the litter material totally several times a week to help control odor.
- Toys – ***NEVER give your ferret any toys that are made of rubber, latex or foam!*** Ferrets love to chew on these types of toys and end up ingesting pieces of the toy. These toy pieces cause the potential for a FATAL intestinal obstruction if not recognized early enough. Make sure to remove ANY items with any type of rubber on it: head phones, television/vcr remote controls, rubber bands, dog toys, baby toys, calculators, pencils, pens, cordless phones, gym shoes....we think you get the idea. Pretty much anything that is plastic/rubber and looks like then can chew it!

More appropriate toys are those made for ferrets that are cloth balls with a jingle ball inside the ball (bell-balls), large cardboard mailing tubes, paper bags, ping pong balls, golf balls and dryer hose.

GROOMING



Ferrets in general are fastidious creatures that need very little grooming. The basic areas of grooming that will be covered are the pelt, ears, and nails.

Pelt – Ferrets replace their coat twice a year through a process called molting. This occurs in the spring and in the fall. The most dramatic molt is often in the spring when the ferret’s thick undercoat of the winter is lost over a few days. The fall molt is less dramatic since there is less hair to be shed from the summer. The hair coat should be shiny and thick, never dull or dry.

Ferrets have a natural musky odor produced by oil glands in their skin. This odor is normal and natural for this species and you should not be continually trying to wash away or covering it up with perfumes. The majority of the ferrets in the United States are sold as “descented”; this means that the ferret has surgically had its anal glands removed. These glands are expressed only when a ferret is frightened or angry and the scent dissipates quickly. Having these glands removed does not remove the natural musky odor that makes a ferret smell like a ferret. If you do not like this smell you really should reconsidered having them as a pet.

Ears – Ferrets normally produce a large amount of reddish-brown ear wax. This wax protects the ear canal and the ear surface by trapping debris that could enter the ear. If your ferret is having healthy production of ear wax you don’t need to clean your ferret’s ears at all! If you notice a coffee-grind appearance of earwax, your ferret could have ear mites (*Otodectes cynotis*). If your ferret is scratching its ears frequently, if there are scabs, lumps or bumps around the ears you should seek veterinary assistance to find out the underlying problem with your ferrets ears.

Nails – Ferrets in the wild would naturally wear down their nails. However, our ferrets do not have this luxury so we must trim their nails. Prior to cutting your ferrets nails you should have an experienced person show you nail trimming techniques before you do it the first time. When cutting the ferrets nails you can cut them by scruffing the pet. Grab the skin along the back of the neck firmly and lift the ferret until their feet leave the ground. Most ferrets will stay very calm in this position allowing minor procedures to be done. When cutting the nails watch for the visible blood supply at the base of the nail called the quick. Avoid cutting into this area since there are nerve tissue, as well as a blood supply. If you do cut the quick apply styptic powder to the area. This powder can be obtained from any pet store and many veterinary clinics.

VACCINATIONS

- ✓ **CANINE DISTEMPER** – Canine distemper (CD) is a contagious disease caused by a paramyxovirus (Canine Distemper Virus or CDV). This virus is deadly to ferrets and should not be discounted as an important vaccine. CDV can be transmitted to ferrets directly from infected animals including other ferrets, dogs, foxes, raccoons, and through contact with infected material such as shoes or clothing. In other words, just because your ferret doesn't go outside and you have no other pets does not mean you cannot bring this deadly virus home to your pet!

It is the current recommendation to have baby ferrets vaccinated 3 - 4 times. The first vaccination is given prior to being shipped to the pet store or the breeder performs this prior to taking your new fuzzy home; then additional vaccinations at 9, 12, 16 weeks of age then annually. There is evidence that the vaccination may last up to three years in some animals, but an antibody titer is suggested to determine if this is the case for each pet.

- ✓ **RABIES** – Rabies is caused by the Rhabdovirus that can affect many species of animals including man. The virus is shed in the saliva and transmission is usually through a bite wound. It can also be spread through contact of infected saliva with a mucous membrane or any open wound. Since rabies is a human health issue, there are strict local and state regulations that govern the vaccination of most domestic pets for rabies. In some areas of the country, if a ferret bites a human and it was not vaccinated for rabies within the past 12 months, the ferret will be confiscated and destroyed so that brain can be examined for the rabies virus. Please make sure to find out what the laws are regarding rabies vaccination and ferret bites in your area before there is a problem. Rabies vaccinations are recommended after 14 weeks of age and then annually thereafter.

ROUTINE VETERINARY CARE

Ferrets up to 2 years of age – Ferrets up to two years of age need annual physical examinations. At this time the veterinarian can decide if your ferret is healthy enough for rabies or distemper vaccination.

Ferrets over 2 years of age – Ferrets have a number of diseases that can plague the adult ferret including adrenal disease, insulinoma, heart disease, and skin tumors. We recommend that the ferret be seen at least once a year for a physical examination. Vaccinations for these mature ferrets should be further discussed with your veterinarian. Blood work and radiographs may also be recommended as your ferret ages to help the veterinarian evaluate your pet's health.

Ferrets over 4 years of age – The risk of your pet ferret developing any of the conditions mentioned above increases with age. Therefore, at this stage of life, we recommend a physical examination at least every six months. It is also recommended to have blood work and radiographs done at least once a year to assess the health of these senior ferrets. Depending on their health status and general exposure risks, further vaccination of the older ferrets may not be warranted and the vaccine titer may be more appropriate.

Ferrets are a lot of work and require patience. If you think this pet will be a low maintenance pet ~ think again! Your ferret will provide you with many years of happiness. Give them every thing you can and they will pay you back tenfold.