

Ferrets



Ferrets continue to be one of the most popular pets in America, third only to dogs and cats. They are easy to keep and care for and have “clown-like” antics that will keep you entertained for hours! They are strict carnivores with very specific dietary needs. Also, they are the only “exotic” pet that requires routine vaccines as a kit (a young ferret less than six months old) and yearly after that. Ferrets are susceptible to some of the same conditions as cats and dogs, and are prone to certain types of cancer as they get older. Yearly exams and vaccines (for distemper and rabies), by a veterinarian familiar with the species, are extremely important for ferrets. With a lifespan of about 5-7 years, a visit once a year can be critical for ensuring a long, healthy life.

Diet

Ferrets are obligate carnivores, which means that they meet their nutritional needs by almost exclusively eating animal-based foods. A ferret’s entire anatomy, physiology and behavior are developed to a strict carnivore’s way of life.

Nutritional Needs

A commercial ferret diet should contain taurine and be composed of 15-20 % animal fat, and no less than 32-40 % animal-based protein. Carbohydrates should never be fed as a ferret’s main source of energy. Commercial diets that are low in carbohydrates, low in fiber, and contain very little to no grains are the best choice. Also, the first three ingredients in a commercial ferret diet should be meat-based.

Housing

The home cage should be a minimum of 24"x 24" x 18" in size. The cage should be multilevel, avoiding steep ramps. The cage flooring should be a solid indestructible material that is easy to clean and deodorize.

Cage Accessories

Sleeping Area

Ferrets need a dark, warm, dry nesting area for a relaxing sleep. This need can be met simply by providing a soft towel over a bed, an old shirt, or a cut off pant leg. Fleece beds specially designed for ferrets are a great option as well.

Litter Box

Ferrets can be litter box trained. Ferrets like to use the bathroom mainly in a corner and on vertical surfaces. Use small cat litter boxes or ferret litter boxes. Pellet or shredded paper based litter is best. Avoid cat litter as it can be an irritant.

Toys

Some options include paper bags, PVC piping, ping pong balls, golf balls, small cloth baby toys, and specially designed ferret toys. **Never give your Ferret any rubber or latex toys.**

Three Basic Housing Needs:

1. Large and interesting enough to run play and wrestle in, to keep them physically healthy and mentally stimulated.
2. Ferret-proofed to prevent injuries and escapes (and minimize housekeeping).
3. Protection from extreme temperatures.

Exercise

Time outside of the cage on a daily basis is important for proper physical and mental activity. Remember a ferret has the physiology of a predatory hunter and will play intensely for an hour or so and then sleep deeply for several hours. Ferrets are expert escape artists and extreme precautions must be taken to safely contain or "ferret proof" the play area. Specially designed exercise pens for ferrets are an excellent option for a safe play area. Care must be taken in multiple species households in order to avoid conflicts, especially in regards to prey animals.

Medical Concerns

Human Influenza

Ferrets are susceptible to the human influenza virus or the “flu”. Ferrets can contract the flu from humans and humans can contract the flu from ferrets. Care should be taken to avoid cross contamination when either human or ferret has the flu.

Heartworm/Fleas

Ferrets, like cats and dogs can become infested with heartworm/fleas. Ferrets should be kept on heartworm/flea preventive as directed by your veterinarian

Foreign Bodies in the Stomach or Intestine

Ferrets, especially under a year of age will eat objects that they should not. These objects can become lodged in the intestine or stomach. Adult ferrets can develop large masses of hair in their stomach, which also can cause an obstruction. All these situations are life threatening and usually require surgery to remove the foreign body. Signs of a foreign body include lethargy, dehydration, vomiting, lack of stools, painful abdomen, and eventually death.

Epizootic Catarrhal Enteritis (ECE)

Commonly known as “green slime disease”, the signs of ECE range from vomiting and a soft, green, mucous-coated stool to bloody diarrhea. An existing ferret in the home is susceptible to contracting the disease by the introduction of a new ferret. It is highly recommended that any new ferrets be quarantined for a period of no less than three weeks (if possible, in a separate house).

Vaccinations:

Rabies is a mandatory vaccine required by New York State law. Rabies is a deadly zoonotic disease to both animals and humans. Preventing the spread of this disease is critical for everyone’s protection.

Distemper

Distemper is a contagious disease caused by a canine distemper virus. The virus can be transmitted directly to ferrets from infected animals including dogs, foxes, raccoons, and other ferrets, and also through contact with infected material such as shoes or clothing. Annual vaccination is recommended to minimize the risk of your ferret contracting the virus.