

Ferrets as Pets

History and Biology: Captive bred ferrets are entertaining pets. Ferrets are in the weasel family (*Mustelidae*) and are related to otters, minks and weasels. Ferrets come descented before sale and are usually already spayed or neutered. They can live anywhere from 6 – 9 years.

Pet ferrets come in a variety of colors and patterns. Ferrets shed twice a year, usually in the spring and fall. The fall and winter coat is usually lighter than the spring and summer coat. In the fall, a ferret may also gain a considerable amount of weight, which is subsequently lost in the spring and summer.

Ferrets can learn to use a litter box, though not as reliably as cats and skunks. A pelleted litter is preferable to a clay, clumping type litter. Litter boxes should be changed daily.

Ferrets are very playful and like spending time outside of their cage exploring and playing. They should be closely supervised while out of their cage as they enjoy chewing plastic and eating rubber which may cause a gastrointestinal obstruction. Though ferrets tend to be nocturnal, they will adapt to the household routine. Most ferrets enjoy having other ferrets as cage mates and will often form close bonds with those in their group.

Due to their speed and small size, ferrets are easily stepped on or dropped and children under the age of 10 should be closely supervised if handling pet ferrets.

Housing:

- When unsupervised, ferrets should be housed in as large of a wire cage as possible. Ferrets enjoy hammocks and other toys. Avoid rubber toys or mats. Most ferrets prefer corner litter boxes as they have a low side and are easy to step into. Use paper pelleted litter and avoid clay-based litter, cedar or pine.
- Ferrets may chew and dig on furniture and carpets. They may also chew on electrical cords, shoes or house plants. When allowed to roam, their environment must be hazard free. Additionally, ferrets can be escape artists and may disappear into small holes in the wall or floor. Consider microchipping your ferret in the event he/she gets loose.

Diet:

- Clean, fresh water should always be available. Providing water in a water bottle with a ball valve is possible, although using a ceramic bowl is also appropriate. The bottles should be cleaned regularly. Brushes are available at most pet stores to clean water bottles. Tap water or filtered water may be used. Well water should be avoided unless it is potable for human consumption.

- **Ferrets are obligate carnivores, and require a high lean protein, low carbohydrate ferret kibble.** Avoid foods that contain high amounts of fruits or vegetables ingredients in the food, it is likely not low carbohydrate. Look for a high-quality commercial ferret kibble that has a minimum of 50 percent protein. Good choices are Pretty Pets Natural Gold, prescription diets feline Purina DM and Hill's m/d. Low carbohydrate foods can also be helpful in preventing insulinomas or inflammatory bowel disease. Ferret kibble can usually be fed free choice.

Veterinary Care:

- Ferrets are generally already spayed or neutered before they are sent to pet stores.
- **Ferrets require vaccination. Ferrets should be vaccinated for canine distemper at the ages of 8, 11 and 14 weeks of age. This vaccine should be boosted yearly.** Rabies vaccination is also recommended and this can be given at 12-14 weeks of age and should be boosted yearly.
- Every year, ferrets should have comprehensive bloodwork and a urinalysis. This will help detect some of the more common ferret diseases.
- Ferrets should have a dentistry every year to check for broken or infected teeth and to have them cleaned.
- Finding a good veterinarian is recommended. It is very important to call and see if a veterinarian is comfortable seeing a pet ferret. Pet ferrets should be examined every six months.

Common Diseases:

- Fleas: ferrets are susceptible to cat and dog fleas. They can be treated with topical flea products such as Advantage, Frontline or Revolution.
- Ear mites: mites are small parasites that live in the ears of ferrets as well as cats and dogs. Ferrets may have itchy ears and dark, black debris.
- Insulinomas: this is a disease condition caused by a slow-growing tumor on the pancreas which secretes excess insulin which lowers the blood sugar. This can be dangerous as it can cause the ferret to have hypoglycemia which may cause weakness, inactivity, dizziness, drooling and seizures. Use Karo syrup on the gums of the patient should this happen and call a veterinarian immediately. This is an emergency!
- Adrenal Tumors: this complex disease condition is caused by a tumor which grows from the adrenal gland causing an excess of hormones to be produced. Symptoms include hair loss, difficulty urinating in males, itchiness, increased aggression and increased odor. Treatment involves surgical incision of the tumor. A preventative is available! Deslorelin implants can be used to help prevent this condition.
- Colds and influenza: ferrets are susceptible to human flu and cold viruses. Symptoms are similar to those seen in people. Avoid close contact with your ferret if you have a cold or the flu.

