

## Caring for your Pet Ferret

### BASIC HUSBANDRY

#### General Information

##### Vital Statistics

Body Weight: Male 1000g–2000g; Female 500–1000g

Life Span: 5–8 years

Sexual Maturity: 4–8 months

##### Behavior and Handling

- Ferrets have a curious and playful attitude. Discipline and training is important in young ferrets, so they don't develop inappropriate behaviors such as biting and becoming possessive of toys.
- Ferrets are usually more active in the early morning and evening.
- Ferrets have a habit of getting into everything. They will often attack household plants, steal socks, and push items down from shelves. They will also steal items they treasure and hoard them in several stashes around your home.
- Ferrets like to burrow and will often do so into the backs of sofas, undersides of mattresses, pillowcases, drawers, ducts, boxes, and cabinets. Keep in mind that ferrets can slip into very small spaces—wherever their head will fit, so will their bodies.
- Ferrets should be picked up underneath the front legs.
- Children handling the ferret should sit on the floor and hold the ferret in their lap. Children should handle ferrets only under adult supervision.

##### Reproductive Information

- Ferrets should be spayed or neutered to prevent them from developing potentially life-threatening medical problems.
- Most ferrets are already spayed or neutered before being purchased from the pet store; however, if you are sure your ferret has not been spayed or neutered, you should have this done as soon as possible.

##### Housing

- Ferrets should be housed in a cage that is a minimum of 2 ft. x 4 ft. Many ferret cages have several levels to allow for more surface area for the ferret to climb and play.
- Sleeping areas should be provided for your ferret. Commercial “ferret hammocks” are available from pet stores, or you can offer towels or old T-shirts as bedding.
- Bedding should be checked daily for signs of chewing—this is especially important for younger ferrets.
- A litter box should be provided in one corner of the cage. Use a low dust litter like those made from paper pulp—Care Fresh bedding and Yesterday's News both work well. Ferrets tend to move litter boxes around, so you may want to secure the box in a corner.



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- Your ferret should be allowed supervised daily exercise time out of the cage. Ferrets love to play in boxes and run through tubes—dryer vent hoses work well for this purpose. Small, hard rubber dog toys and toys with squeakers usually appeal to ferrets. Watch your ferret closely to be sure it doesn't break the toy apart.

### **Litter Box Training**

- A litter box should be offered at all times.
- Remember to use only paper pulp products as litter.
- Clay cat litter, clumping cat litter, and wood shavings are not recommended because they can cause eye, skin, and respiratory problems.

### **Diet**

- Ferrets should be fed a quality commercial ferret food such as Totally Ferret, Marshall Farms, or Eight in One ferret food. Most cat foods are not recommended because they are not nutritionally balanced for ferrets and can cause health problems as the ferret gets older. Some high quality cat food like Iams' Kitten may be acceptable, but consult your veterinarian first.
- Your ferrets may enjoy occasional treats such as raisins, cheerios, or cat treats. Treats should be offered in a limited amounts.
- Ferretone or Linatone can also be offered as a treat, and it helps keep the skin from becoming dry indoors.
- Laxatone or Petramalt—cat hairball preventatives—should be offered to your ferret three times a week. Hairballs may become an increasing problem as the ferret gets older and can cause the intestinal tract to become blocked.

## MEDICAL CONDITIONS

### Conditions Requiring Veterinary Attention

#### **Foreign Body**

- Young ferrets tend to eat things they shouldn't—especially when they are not being supervised—and the intestinal tract may become fully or partially blocked. This blockage can cause a serious medical emergency that may require surgery. Ferrets should always be supervised when playing outside their cage, and owners should look out for items such as remote control buttons, small plastic toys and their parts, and cherry pits. Owners should also look out for items made out of rubber and stuffing from toys or pillows, as ferrets can chew pieces from these materials that can also cause blockages if ingested.
- Hairballs, which are common in ferrets, can also cause a blockage that requires surgical care.

#### **Influenza**

- Ferrets can contract the human influenza virus. Owners should watch for symptoms such as sneezing, coughing, fever, and lethargy. There is no cure for the influenza virus, but ferrets will often benefit from supportive care such as antibiotics and fluid therapy while the virus “runs its course.” Ferrets that are not eating well on their own may also benefit from assisted feedings.

## **ECE or “Green Slime Disease”**

- ECE is an extremely contagious virus that ferrets contract through contact with another ferret. Symptoms of ECE include explosive diarrhea that may be green in color and lethargy. Because ECE is a virus, there is no true cure for it; however, many ferrets benefit from supportive care with fluids, anti-diarrheals, and antibiotics. This virus can be extremely dangerous in young and older ferrets and can cause liver disease or death. If you suspect that your ferret may have ECE, you should contact your veterinarian immediately.

## **Adrenal Gland Disease**

- Adrenal Gland Disease is extremely common in older ferrets, and most ferrets over the age of three will get adrenal gland tumors. Symptoms include hair loss over the tail and pelvis/hip area of the body, dry itchy skin, a swollen vulva in female ferrets, and difficulty urinating (due to enlargement of the prostate gland) in male ferrets. Adrenal gland disease can be treated with surgical removal of the affected adrenal gland and/or with monthly injections of a drug called Lupron. Lupron will help treat the symptoms, but it will not cure the ferret of the disease. If surgery is elected, then the ferret should have blood work and X-rays prior to the surgery to help ensure its safety while under anesthesia. Your veterinarian will help you determine whether surgical or medical treatment is indicated.

## **Insulinoma**

- Insulinomas are common in older ferrets, and many ferrets over the age of three will eventually get insulinomas (tumors on the pancreas). Symptoms include lethargy, hind end weakness, decreased appetite, chronic weight loss, difficulty waking a sleeping ferret, drooling, pawing at the mouth, coma and death. The symptoms are caused by low blood glucose and get worse the lower the glucose becomes. Insulinoma can often be detected with yearly geriatric blood work. Treatment includes oral steroids for the rest of the ferret’s life. Surgery for insulinoma can be performed but isn’t recommended because the tumors rapidly grow back after surgery.

## **EMERGENCY / CRITICAL CARE**

All emergencies require veterinary assistance. Use the following guidelines to assist you in caring for your ferret until you can contact a veterinarian.

### **Traumatic Injuries**

#### **Broken Bones**

- Provide your ferret with soft bedding such as a towel, blanket, or lambswool.
- Minimize handling.
- Keep your ferret in a **warm**, dark, and quiet area.
- Keep your ferret as calm as possible and contact a veterinarian or local animal emergency clinic immediately.

## **Skin Injuries/Blood loss**

- For any type of injury with blood loss, use direct pressure with a towel or clean gauze to prevent further blood loss. Contact your veterinarian immediately if you are unable to stop the bleeding.

## **Head Injuries**

- Provide your ferret with soft bedding such as a towel, blanket, or lambswool.
- Minimize handling.
- Keep your ferret in a cool, dark, and quiet environment.
- Keep your ferret as calm as possible and contact a veterinarian or local animal emergency clinic immediately.

## Severe Illnesses

### **Respiratory Distress**

- If your ferret experiences open-mouth breathing or gasping for air, remove all bedding and minimize handling and stress.
- Keep your ferret in a quiet, **cool**, and dark environment until you are able to reach your veterinarian or local animal emergency clinic.

### **Low Blood Sugar**

- Apply sugar water or Karo syrup to your ferret's gums.
- Keep your ferret in a warm, dark, and quiet environment.
- Minimize handling your ferret to prevent nausea and/or vomiting.
- Offer your ferret Ensure or Clinicare once your ferret is awake and alert to keep up blood glucose levels until you can reach your veterinarian.
- Seek veterinary assistance immediately!

## HEALTH RECOMMENDATIONS

### Things For Your Veterinarian To Do

#### **Yearly Physical**

- Any newly acquired pet should always have an initial physical exam. During the exam, the doctor will check teeth, eyes, ears, heart, and lungs, and will palpate the abdomen.
- Your ferret should receive a rabies vaccination and a distemper vaccination. Your ferret should be seen by a veterinarian once a year for an annual exam and also to receive rabies and distemper vaccination boosters.
- In addition to an annual exam and vaccines, your ferret may need to have a fecal sample checked for internal parasites and an ear swabbing to check for ear mites.

## **Blood Work**

- Your ferret should have blood work done yearly. This helps detect early signs of disease, such as signs of insulinoma. If some diseases are caught early enough, treatments may be available that would extend your ferret's life.

## **Dental Cleaning**

- Like cats and dogs, ferrets can have a build up of tartar on their teeth. Older ferrets may need to have a dental cleaning performed at some time. If you get your ferret accustomed to having its teeth brushed at an early age you will prevent a lot of this tartar from forming. *We require sedation for this procedure.*

## Things For You To Do

### **Hairball Prevention**

- Your ferret should be given 1–2 cc's of Laxatone, Petromalt, or other cat hairball preventative 2–3 times a week.
- You should brush or comb your ferret regularly, or use a lint roller to remove any loose hair.

### **Grooming**

- Ferrets need to have their nails trimmed on a regular basis. When their nails become long and sharp, they can get caught in bedding which will injure their toes, feet, and legs.
- Ferrets should not be bathed more than once a month. Bathing them more often will remove the natural oils from their coat and will cause dry, itchy skin. You can use ferret or kitten shampoo during bath times.
- Occasionally you will need to clean your ferret's ears. You can do this at bath time and dry the ears with a cotton ball. Be careful not to use cotton swabs, because you can injure the eardrum if you go too deep into the ear.