

The Facts about Ferrets

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Congratulations on your new pet ferret! Ferrets make unique and delightful pets, with energetic and playful personalities. They have been described as being between dogs and cats in temperament and disposition – they learnt to come when called, will cuddle in your lap, ride in a shoulder bag, love to explore, and delight in chasing, retrieving and playing with all sorts of toys.

This handout presents the basics of ferret history and care. Your veterinarian will keep you updated on new developments in ferret health care and, if you are interested, will be glad to recommend additional sources of ferret information, such as books, magazines, clubs, and newsletters.

A Ferret History Lesson

Domestic ferrets (*Mustela putorius furo*) belong to the order Carnivora and to the family Mustelidae. Today's domestic ferrets are believed to be the result of centuries of controlled breeding of its most probable wild relative, the European polecat. Evidence of the ferret's domestication dates back to 4 B.C., when they were used as working pets. In Europe, domestic ferrets were originally used as hunting animals for the control of rabbit and rodent populations. Today, domestic ferrets are still used as working animals in Europe, Australia, and New Zealand.

In the U.S., the domestic ferret has been maintained primarily as a pet since its introduction here approximately 300 years ago. The ferret's domesticated status in the U.S. remains somewhat controversial, however. Laws regarding keeping ferrets as pets vary from state to state, and may even differ in individual cities or counties within a single state. Your veterinarian can be an excellent source of information about changing laws concerning ferrets as pets.

Ferret Basics

Life Span: 5-8 years in the U.S.

Mature Body Weight: Males 3-6 lbs
Females 1-2 lbs

Color Variations: In the U.S., more than 30 ferret color variations are recognized. These variations are believed to originate from crosses between three naturally occurring color types: sable, albino, and cinnamon. Some of the more common color hybrids of these types include silver, blacked-eye white, chocolate, Siamese, panda, and Shetland sable.

Housing: Rabbit or larger-sized cages are recommended. Many pet stores now carry cages specifically designed for ferrets - with multiple levels and a variety of "accessories," including ferret hammocks, beds, and tunnels. Ferrets can be litter trained fairly easily as it is their natural instinct to designate a "latrine" in their environment. A litter box with an elevated urine guard in one corner of their cage, using a paper or pelleted litter type is recommended.

Ferrets should be well supervised at all times if they are allowed to roam the household. All rooms accessible to the ferret should be "ferret-proofed," as their natural curiosity can often lead to harm. Ferret's wiry bodies can squeeze into some dangerous places, so all holes to the outdoors or to areas from which the ferret cannot be retrieved must be blocked off. Access under and into furniture, stereo speakers, and insulation should also be prevented, as ferrets love to chew foam rubber and latex. This can be both destructive to your household and dangerous to your ferret. Latex rubber toys designed for dogs and cats also present a health risk. When swallowed, these rubber pieces can cause serious intestinal blockages. Only safe, durable items should be introduced as ferret "toys." Recommended toys include those made of hard plastic or metal, and well-constructed cloth toys made for cats or babies. Some of the simplest things make the best ferret toys - paper bags, boxes, large mailing tubes, or PCV pipes.

Diet: A diet formulated specifically for ferrets should be used. Ferrets are strict carnivores and require a diet containing 36-38% meat-based protein, which cannot be supplied by even the highest quality cat or dog foods. Ferret-specific diets are now available from a variety of pet food manufacturers. Fresh water should be available, in a bowl or bottle, at all times.

Veterinary Care

6-8 weeks of age: Wellness examination, Canine Distemper vaccine, fecal examination for internal parasites

Canine Distemper Booster (given 3 weeks after the date of the first vaccine)

12 weeks of age: Rabies vaccine

4-8 months of age: Most of the large ferret breeders in the U.S. neuter and descent ferret kits prior to making them available to pet stores for sale. Sexually intact ferrets are generally only available through local, small-scale breeders. Unless a ferret is being kept for breeding purposes, it should be spayed or castrated at this age. Female ferrets that are not spayed and not allowed to breed can quickly develop a fatal condition known as aplastic anemia. Castrating male ferrets appears to reduce aggressive tendencies and can markedly decrease odor without descenting. Descenting male or female ferrets is an optional procedure.

Yearly: Wellness examination, Canine Distemper booster, Rabies booster

After 3 years of age, we recommend a veterinary exam every 6 months to screen for geriatric problems, with a complete workup (including bloodwork) yearly.

Common Ferret Diseases

One of the most serious ferret diseases is canine distemper, which is considered 100% fatal, but is preventable with vaccination. Ferrets are also susceptible to the human influenza virus and may suffer many of the same symptoms as humans. After 3 years of age, ferrets become prone to several "geriatric" diseases, including adrenal neoplasia, insulinoma, lymphosarcoma, skin neoplasia, and kidney disease. If your ferret exhibits clinical signs such as refusing to eat, vomiting, diarrhea, lethargy, sneezing, breathing difficulty, hair loss, or anything that causes concern, please call your veterinarian as soon as possible.