



THE CENTER FOR

BIRD & EXOTIC ANIMAL MEDICINE

Ferret Care Sheet

Scientific name:

Mustela putorius furo (aka “mouse-eating smelly thief”)

Claims to fame:

- Ferrets are friendly, mischievous pets that develop strong bonds with their owners.
- With proper care, ferrets typically live 7-10 years.
- Ferrets have an average length of 20 inches (51 cm), including the tail, and usually weigh 1.5–4 pounds (0.7–2 kg).
- Ferrets sleep about 18 hours each day and spend the rest of their time in active play. They are not nocturnal, and can adapt to a wide variety of owner schedules.
- More than 30 color varieties of ferrets are recognized by the American Ferret Association.
- Male ferrets are called hobs; females are jills. A spayed female is a sprite, and a neutered male is a gib. Ferrets < 1 year are known as kits. A group of ferrets is known as a “business.”
- Almost all ferrets within the US are bred by a company named Marshall Farms. These ferrets are spayed/neutered and descented at a very young age (within weeks of birth). Marshall Farms identifies all of its ferrets by two small circular tattoos in the right ear.
- “Descenting” is the term used for removal of a ferret’s anal glands. This does not prevent ferrets from having a musky body odor, as most of this odor is produced by the sebaceous glands in the skin. Frequent bathing is not recommended in ferrets, as this can actually stimulate the sebaceous glands to produce more stinky secretions.
- Ferrets are illegal pets in certain US states.
- Ferrets have been domesticated for thousands of years, and were historically used for both rodent/rabbit hunting and companionship.
- In the United Kingdom, there is a sport known as “ferret legging” in which men tie their trouser legs closed at the ankles, place two ferrets into their trousers, and then fasten their belts securely to prevent the ferrets from escaping. Competitors cannot wear

underwear during the match, and cannot be drunk or drugged. The man who can stand this arrangement for the longest time period wins. The current record is 5 hours and 30 minutes (2010).

Housing:

Ferrets should be housed indoors in a tall wire cage at least 24"x24"x18" with primarily solid flooring. They are prone to heat stress, and should be kept in an environment between 65-85°F. Ferrets usually like to sleep in dark places; a cloth tent or hide box should be provided for this purpose. Multiple hammocks and soft blankets should also be available. Washing the cage bedding every few days is the best way to minimize natural ferret odor. All toys should be sturdy enough to prevent destruction and large enough to prevent ingestion. Favored toys often include tunnels and paper bags.

Many ferrets can be trained to use a litterbox, which should be filled with a recycled paper product (such as Carefresh) or pelleted litter. It is recommended to have several litterboxes per ferret to maximize use.

Ferrets should be allowed outside of their regular cage in a "ferret-proofed" area for several hours every day to exercise and interact with the family. However, ferrets should NOT be allowed to roam the house unattended! They are very prone to eating foreign objects and toxins due to their curious natures.

"Ferret-proofing" an area is often very difficult. All holes must be blocked, and all materials that can be burrowed into/ingested/destroyed must be removed. Never underestimate a ferret's capability for getting into trouble!

Diet:

Ferrets are strictly carnivorous. Their natural diet in the wild would be whole prey items such as mice. Because ferret GI tracts are very short, they cannot digest carbohydrates or fiber well. They need high protein, high fat diets with minimal carbohydrates and fiber. A good diet for an adult ferret would contain at least 30-35% meat protein and roughly 15-20% fat.

Ferret owners are often advised to feed their pet kitten food. This is not a good idea! While kitten food does have higher protein content compared to other dog and cat diets, it is too high in fat and other nutrients to be healthy for ferrets.

There are several healthy diets available that have been formulated specifically to provide complete nutrition for ferrets. We recommend the Evo, Zupreem, Mazuri ferret diets as well as Innova, Totally Ferret, and Natural Gold. These foods should be offered all day long in controlled portions as directed on the label.

Treats should compose no more than 5% of the total diet. Appropriate treats for ferrets include small portions of cooked organ or muscle meat, eggs, and chicken/turkey/beef baby food (no added vegetables). Ferrets should NOT be fed sugary treats such as dried/fresh fruits, dairy products, cereal, or peanut butter. These foods contain far too many carbohydrates, and can predispose ferrets to

serious illness from insulinomas. (See our “Ferret and Cancer” handout for more information.) Most store-bought treats are unhealthy for ferrets.

Ferrets should always have access to fresh, clean water. This can be provided in either a rodent water bottle or a water bowl. Do not add vitamin supplements to the water, as these are unnecessary and can promote bacterial growth.

Common Health problems:

- Adrenal gland disease
- Many types of cancer, especially lymphoma and insulinoma (see “Cancer in Ferrets” handout).
- Ingesting foreign objects/toxins
- Parasites, both internal and external
- Dental disease
- Heart disease
- Influenza – ferrets can actually catch the flu from people!
- Unspayed females can become severely ill if they are not bred during each heat cycle

All ferrets should receive a veterinary exam and Distemper/Rabies vaccinations yearly. A ferret-safe version of the distemper vaccine must be used, as some dog vaccines may actually induce this fatal disease in ferrets. Due to recent legislation, as of January 2012, all ferrets in Washington must have proof of vaccination.

Resources:

The American Ferret Association has an informative website, www.ferret.org, which can serve as a resource for ferret owners.

In addition to our regular business hours, the Center for Bird and Exotic Animal Medicine offers emergency services 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Please feel free to contact us anytime with ferret health care questions - we will always do our best to assist you. Our goal is to partner with you to provide your ferret with the healthiest, longest, and happiest life possible!