

How to Keep Your Ferret Happy, Healthy and Safe

- Groom your ferret on a regular basis: bathe (if needed), trim nails, brush teeth and clean ears.
- Provide toys for play in the enclosure. Choose toys that the ferret can bat about, roll, toss or chew but not ingest.
- Check the play area for potential hazards.
- Take your ferret to an exotic animal veterinarian for an annual physical examination, vaccinations and any treatments or tests needed to maintain optimal health.
- Keep your ferret up-to-date on canine distemper and rabies vaccinations.
- Consider heartworm prevention if your veterinarian recommends it.
- Avoid exposing your ferret to humans with influenza, as ferrets are susceptible and the virus can be life-threatening.
- Proper housing should include:
 - » An enclosure that is at least 2ft x 4ft per ferret (the larger the better) and multilevel if multiple ferrets are housed together. The animal should be placed in this type of enclosure when unattended
 - » Have solid flooring, or if wired, be filled with bedding consisting of towels, fleece or newspaper or commercially available bedding made of recycled paper or cloth
 - » Contain "cage furniture": hammocks, muffs, corrugated tubes, dryer vent tubing and large PVC pipes for tunneling
 - » Contain folded fabric, such as a sheet or flannel clothing, for burrowing while sleeping
 - » Have average room temperature and humidity (avoid greater than 80°F [27°C] and humidity over 55%)
 - » Provide for a constant source of fresh water
 - » Include a litter box containing shredded newspaper, compressed paper bedding or other recycled paper products. Avoid pine, cedar and corn cob as bedding.
- It is important to prevent ferrets from accessing:
 - » Most table scraps or nonmeat-based treats
 - » Foods with high levels of grains, such as corn, soy or wheat
 - » Dairy products, bones, chocolate
 - » Foam, rubber or plastic toys that can be easily torn apart and ingested
 - » Unsupervised freedom in the home
 - » Larger or potentially dangerous pets and unsupervised children
 - » Chemicals and medications for humans or other pets
 - » Electrical cords
 - » Towels or fabrics with ingestible fibers or with holes (in which the ferret could get stuck or caught)

Common Disorders of Ferrets

It is recommended that your ferret have an annual exam. However, if you notice your ferret exhibiting any of these signs or symptoms, please contact your veterinarian as soon as possible.

- **Canine Distemper Virus**
- **Cancer**
 - » Adrenocortical disease (ACD)
 - » Insulinoma
 - » Lymphoma
 - » Neoplasia
- **Cardiac**
- **Dental**
- **Dermatologic**
 - » Ear mites
 - » Fleas
- **Gastrointestinal**
- **Foreign body ingestion, especially by young ferrets**
- **Heart worms**
- **Trauma**
- **Urinary**

Resources

- **Association of Exotic Mammal Veterinarians** (AEMV.com)
- **Lafeber Emeraid** (lafeber.com/vet/mammal-medicine)
- **Oxbow Animal Health** (oxbowanimalhealth.com)
- **American Ferret Association** (www.ferret.org)

EXOTICS COMPANION CARE SERIES

How to Care for Your

Ferret



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To learn more, visit the Association of Exotic Mammal Veterinarians at AEMV.com

ABOUT YOUR FERRET

*The domestic ferret (*Mustela putorius furo*) descends from the European polecat and was originally raised for fur production and to hunt rodents and rabbits. Male ferrets are called hobs, and females are called jills. Baby ferrets are called kits.*

Several color variations have developed through breeding the domestic ferret. The most common color is the sable or "fitch," which has a dark mask across the nose and around the dark-colored eyes (see cover). A pastel or cream-colored ferret has a light-colored mask around dark eyes (below).

Laws regarding ownership of ferrets vary from state to state. A few states forbid ferret ownership altogether; some ban certain activities, such as hunting with ferrets and some states require a permit. States also vary regarding the requirements for rabies vaccination. Before purchasing a ferret, check the laws in your state.

Ferrets are extremely playful, active, curious and good-natured animals that enjoy the company of humans and other animals.



What to Expect from Your Ferret

Ferrets are extremely playful, active, curious and good-natured animals that enjoy the company of humans and other animals. For these reasons they make wonderful pets, but they also require a fair amount of attention and careful supervision. Ferrets love to run around free in the home and can be taught to use a litter box like a cat. However, you may need to place a litter box in the corner of every room or area where the ferret spends a great deal of time. Ferrets are generally quiet. The only vocalizations they make are chuckles and giggles during play, squeals or screams when threatened and sometimes cries when in pain.

Is your ferret male or female?

You can determine your ferret's sex by examining the external genitalia. Males have a prominent prepuce on their abdomen that contains the penis, similar to a dog. Most ferrets are neutered or spayed at an early age, which results in a pet that is calmer and less aggressive and with a less objectionable odor. However, there is some evidence early spay and neuter may lead to adrenocortical disease. Therefore, if you purchase a non-spayed or neutered ferret, talk with an experienced ferret veterinarian about alternatives, such as implantable anti-hormone medication. Female ferrets that are not spayed or do not receive anti-hormone medication are at high risk of bone marrow suppression and death due to excessive estrogen.

Are ferrets tame?

Ferrets learn quickly and can be trained to come to cues such as bells, whistles or clickers. They easily adapt to a harness and leash and love to go for walks and to travel. Some ferrets may make a habit of biting or becoming covetous of toys; discipline and training when they are young or new to your household will minimize nipping and biting when they are older.

What do ferrets do all day?

Ferrets are usually most active in the early morning and evening. Natural exuberant play behaviors mean they may destroy household plants, steal and hide small objects and knock items from shelves. They are known to burrow into the backs of sofas, undersides of mattresses, pillowcases, drawers, ducts, boxes and cabinets. They can slip into very small spaces, as wherever the heads will fit, the bodies can follow. Therefore, it is important to ferret-proof your home. Ferrets are at risk for GI obstruction from swallowing objects such as headphone covers, remote control buttons, material from a stuffed animal or rubber or plastic objects.

What should feed your ferret?

Free-ranging ferrets are strictly carnivorous and eat whole prey, such as rodents. In captivity, the ferret's diet should mimic their natural diet as closely as possible. Ferrets may be fed whole prey; however, most owners choose a commercial diet that lists meat as the first three or more ingredients and contains the lowest amount of grains (corn, wheat or soy). However, grain-free diets should be avoided as they are potentially linked to bladder stones in ferrets. Treats should also be meat-based; treats that contain sugar, fruit or grains should be strictly avoided, as they may contribute to illnesses. Ferrets may have trouble converting to an unfamiliar food. Gradually adding a new food to the original diet and increasing the amount over several weeks is often a successful way to convert a ferret to a better diet.

Care of your geriatric ferret?

All ferrets need a yearly check-up. However, ferrets over the age of three years should have an examination every six months, as they are at higher risk for diseases. Your exotic animal veterinarian will perform a complete physical examination, evaluating your ferret's overall condition, listening to the heart and lungs, checking for ear mites and palpating the abdomen for masses. Your veterinarian may recommend blood work, x-rays, urinalysis, ultrasonography or electrocardiology to screen for internal disease.