



## **Pet Kare Clinic**

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“Happy Pets, Happy People”

## **Care of Ferrets**

from Midwest Bird & Exotic Animal Hospital



### **DIET**

**Food** – Ferrets are carnivores, meaning that they are strictly meat eaters. It has been shown that they can only utilize amino acids from meat proteins and cannot digest amino acids from plant proteins. Many of the cat foods available in the grocery stores have cereal or plant proteins in their formulation, so they are not the best diet for your pet. We suggest the use of high quality cat foods such as Iams or Science Diet Feline diets, or dry ferret foods such as Totally Ferret or Marshall Farms Ferret food, because these are made up of highly digestible top quality meat proteins. For the young ferret under three years of age, we recommend the growth or kitten formulation of these diets because of the higher fat and protein content. For older ferrets that are over 5 years of age your veterinarian may recommend using the maintenance or adult cat formula, particularly if your ferret is experiencing any kidney or liver problems. When checking the food label, make sure that the protein level is between 32% and 38%. A protein content over 40% may be detrimental to the kidneys of the older ferret. Some people prefer to mix two or more kinds of high quality cat or ferret foods together which is also acceptable.

Another important reason to use high quality cat foods, is that if the content of cereal grains (particularly corn) is too high, it may lead to the formation of bladder stones. We rarely see any bladder stone problems on the diets recommended above, however we have seen these problems more frequently with the use of poor quality brands of food.

Ferrets also have a high dietary fat requirement, somewhere between 20% and 30% of the diet. Most high quality cat foods have 18% to 21% so it may be necessary to supplement with a fatty acid supplement (see section below). A diet with a fat content less than this can lead to a dry brittle coat and itchy skin.

The food should be fed dry unless there is a medical reason to do otherwise. Food may be left out to be eaten free choice. Obesity is rarely a problem.

**Water** – Clean, fresh water should always be available and can be given in either a water bottle or a heavy ceramic or weighted bowl. Ferrets like to play in their water and overturn it, so keep that in mind when selecting a container. Supplements do not need to be added to the water.

**Vitamins** – If your pet is on a good quality diet then additional vitamins are not necessary in the healthy pet. Your veterinarian will prescribe any that may be necessary in the case of disease.

**Table Foods** – Cooked meat and egg scraps are suitable table foods to offer your pet as a treat. Do not feed anything that contains bones. Many ferrets also adore a bit of fruit or vegetable, but these times should be fed sparingly, because ferrets cannot digest fiber very well. If too much fruit or vegetable matter is given, it could lead to diarrhea. The rule of thumb is no more than a total of one heaping teaspoon per day/ferret of any treat should be given. Some favorite fruit and vegetable treats are cucumber, green pepper, and melon.

**Never Feed Your Pet Foods That Are High In Refined Sugars!** – Ferrets do not naturally get sugar in their diet and feeding foods high in sugar puts a tremendous strain on the pancreas. The result may be diabetes mellitus which is extremely difficult to treat in the ferret and ultimately leads to an early death. So, do not feed candies, cakes, sugar coated cereals, ice cream, chocolate, sweet dairy products, etc.

**Fatty Acids Supplements** – As already mentioned, ferrets have a high fat requirement and it may be necessary for some animals to receive an additional supplement to improve coat quality. We find this most essential during the winter months, when the air in our homes is very dry and detrimental to the ferret's skin and coat. We recommend using any fatty acid supplement as used in cats (such as Linotone or Ferotone) and feeding 1/8 tsp per ferret daily on the food. Many ferrets really love the taste and will take it right off a spoon! Ferrets may also get meat fat (such as from poultry or beef) in the amount of 1 teaspoon of fat per ferret per day.

**Hairball Laxative** – The accumulation of hair in the stomach of the ferret is a very common occurrence (especially in animals over one year of age) and may result in a costly surgery to remove it. It is much easier to prevent hairballs with the use of a cat hairball laxative. This product generally comes as a sticky paste and ferrets love the taste of it! We recommend giving a ribbon one-half to one inch in length at least every third day. This medication acts only as a lubricant and does not cause diarrhea. If your pet has never tried this before, it is sometimes necessary to smear a little on their lips to introduce them to the taste.

## ENVIRONMENT

**Cage** – The basic cage needed to house up to two ferrets is a wire rabbit cage (24"x24"x18" high) with a wire or solid floor. Newspaper or pelleted bedding such as CelluDry, Mountain Cat Country Litter, Harvest Litter, Yesterday's News, etc. may be used under the wire floor. Aquariums are NOT suitable cages for ferrets because the ventilation is very poor. All types of elaborate caging arrangements may be built by the creative owner. The use of a section of PVC pipe or large cardboard mailing tube can provide a good place for the ferret to exercise and play in. IT IS HIGHLY RECOMMENDED THAT YOUR PET BE CAGED WHEN YOU ARE NOT HOME to prevent any tragic accidents.

**Sleeping Area** – An enclosed sleeping area is NECESSARY or your pet will become extremely frustrated and continually dig at the corner of the cage. A sleeping area can be as simple as a towel or shirt, an old stocking cap, a cardboard or wooden box with a hole cut in the side, the sleeve of a sweatshirt, etc. Please note, that if your ferret likes to chew and eat towels or cloth of any kind, use a box or deep pan of some type instead of towels to prevent an obstruction of the intestinal tract with cloth. The cloth eating habit is usually a baby behavior and stops by the time the pet is a year of age. It can also occur when food is not available at all times.

**Litter Box** – Ferrets can be litter box trained about 90% of the time. A small low-sided box should be placed in the preferred toilet area of the cage (i.e. let your pet pick the spot first, then place the box in that area). You can use kitty litter (avoid the perfumed types), or pelleted bedding (as described in the paragraph on caging) in the box. (The biggest problem with clay kitty litter is that some ferrets will lie in their litter boxes and this will dry out their coat making it brittle and dull looking.) Ferrets do not cover up their waste, therefore, it will probably be necessary to change the box frequently to minimize the odor. When your pet is loose in the house, it may be necessary to place several little boxes or papers in various corners, because ferrets are not very good at returning to "home base" if they get the bathroom urge and they are far away!

**Toys** – NEVER GIVE YOUR PET ANY RUBBER TOYS! Ferrets like to chew and swallow rubber which could result in an intestinal obstruction and death. Make sure to FERRET PROOF your home and remove access to

any other rubber items such as ear phones, stereo speakers, rubber soled shoes, pipe insulation, rubber bands, chair bottom protectors, etc. (While you are at it make sure to get down on your hands and knees and check for any escape holes that the ferret could get into, and plug them up!) Ferrets also like to burrow into furniture and mattresses in search of a snug sleeping area. In the process they may swallow some of the foam rubber stuffing and develop an intestinal obstruction. It is important to cover the bottom of the furniture with hardware cloth or a sheet of wood to prevent this activity. Recliner chairs are also safety hazards and many a pet has lost its life by being suffocated when the chair was reclined. It is best to remove this item altogether from the environment.

Safe toys to give your pet are nylon bones, ping pong and golf balls, small cans, paper bags, cardboard mailing tubes, and very hard plastic toys. Most cloth toys are also suitable, but check carefully for the first week to make sure your pet is not chewing any pieces off of it.

## VACCINATIONS

**Canine Distemper** – THIS DISEASE IS NEARLY 100% FATAL IN THE FERRET! Please have your pet vaccinated to prevent distemper. Even if your pet never leaves the house, it is possible to bring the virus home on your shoes or your clothing. Youngsters should receive their last booster at 14 weeks of age. Thereafter, boosters should be given annually.

**Rabies** – There is now an approved rabies vaccine for ferrets. We recommend the vaccine for all ferrets that will be in any high risk situation where a potential bite may occur. The first vaccines should be given at three months of age with annual boosters thereafter. Please consult the handout [Rabies, Who Needs It?](#) for more detailed information.

## MEDICAL PROBLEMS

**Strong Body Odor** – The ferret produces oily secretions on the skin that have a very strong odor in the mature intact male and female. The odor is under the control of sex hormones, so therefore, when your pet is neutered the odor is largely eliminated. There is also an odor associated with the anal glands (or scent glands) of the ferret, but this will not be noticed unless your ferret sprays the material, usually in response to a fearful situation or when extremely excited. Most ferrets do not express their scent glands with any frequency, and if they do, the odor only lasts a few minutes. Therefore, it is unnecessary to remove the scent glands of the ferret unless there is a disease present.

Bathing should be done with a gentle pet shampoo. Ferrets do not need frequent baths and every two weeks is the absolute maximum. Bathing tends to strip the skin of its essential oils and can lead to a dry itchy condition if done too often.

**Fatal Anemia of Females** – When the female ferret goes into her heat cycle, she will remain in that cycle until she is bred by a male. During this heat period, the levels of the female hormone, estrogen, are very high and it can have a very damaging effect on the bone marrow. The hormone causes the bone marrow to gradually stop producing white blood cells and red blood cells. The condition comes on so slowly, that by the time the external signs of anemia are seen, the condition in the bone marrow is irreversible and the ferret may die despite therapy.

The condition is totally preventable by having your pet spayed. The operation should be performed by the time the pet is six months of age. If your pet comes into heat prior to that time, she can be safely operated on even while she is in heat.

If you wish to breed your pet, but do not wish to do it during a particular heat cycle, then a hormone injection can be given to take her out of heat temporarily. However, these injections should not be used instead of the spay if you have no intention of breeding your pet.

**Fleas** – Ferrets get fleas just like other mammals. If your pet has them, please use a flea product that is safe for cats, such as a powder or pump spray. Do not use flea collars on ferrets. Remember to also treat the house and yard, as fleas spend most of their life off of your pet laying eggs all over the environment.

**Heartworm** – Ferrets are susceptible to heartworm disease. This is a microscopic parasite that lives in the salivary glands of the mosquito and is transmitted to the pet through a mosquito bite. The larvae then grow into a large worm that lodges into the animal's heart and can cause disruption of the blood flow and death.

We recommend the use of a heartworm preventative, called Ivermectin, which is given once a month from April to October. There have been no side effects to this drug. We recommend that ferrets should be on heartworm preventative if they are housed outdoors or go out for walks in the spring and summer.

**Colds and Flu** – Ferrets are highly susceptible to human colds and flu. They will develop the same symptoms as humans do. They will have runny noses, watery eyes, and may develop sneezing or coughing fits, and be off food for several days. Occasionally a pet may have diarrhea, but if this condition is profuse, bloody or accompanied by straining or crying, your veterinarian should be contacted immediately. There is usually no need for any medications, just tender loving care and lots of rest for five to seven days. If, however, your pet completely loses its appetite, develops green or yellow eye or nasal discharges, or becomes depressed or lethargic, please call your veterinarian right away. Some viral flu infections may require more supportive care or a secondary bacterial infection may require antibiotics.

**Foreign Bodies in the Stomach or Intestine** – As mentioned previously, ferrets are very prone to eating rubber, and they are also prone to developing hair balls. Other items that ferrets have been known to eat include soft plastic items, cotton balls, bones, and towels. The signs of a foreign body that has found its way into the digestive tract are varied depending on where the material has lodged. Some of the signs that might be noted are gradual wasting, extreme depression or lethargy, vomiting, persistent dark tarry stools and loss of appetite. If any of these signs are present in your pet, do not wait to have him examined as soon as possible by your veterinarian. **EXTREME LETHARGY OR DEPRESSION IS AN EMERGENCY!**

**Geriatric Diseases** – Unfortunately the average life span of the American ferret is only five to seven years. Starting at about three years of age we see a marked increase in a variety of diseases in the ferret. Cancer is very common, along with liver, kidney and heart disease. Please refer to our handout entitled Senior Citizens for recommendations on veterinary and home care for these special pets.

\*FINAL NOTE: There has been much negative publicity about the ferret over the years. It is unjustly given, primarily through ignorance about these fascinating little animals. The ferret is a domesticated animal, and has been bred in captivity since 4 BC. The ferret we keep as a pet is not found naturally in this country, but came originally from Europe, where its wild counterparts still live.

Being a pet owner requires a certain amount of responsibility to protect the animal and care for it. If children are present in the household under six years of age, we counsel you to supervise carefully any contact these little ones may have with the ferret. If supervision is not possible, then don't get a ferret until the child is older. (This warning holds true for ANY pet). In addition, do not place your pet ferret (or any other pet for that matter) in a situation with other humans where it is likely to become frightened or threatened and where it may react in the only way it knows to defend itself, (other than running away) and that is by biting.

By being responsible pet owners, and sharing the joy of our charges with others, we can much to reverse the bad press that our little friends have received.

