



Pet Kare Clinic

102 Anglers Drive, Steamboat Springs, CO 80487
Business: (970) 879-5273 Fax: (970) 879-2691

“Happy Pets, Happy People”

Ferret Senior Citizens and Their Special Needs

from Midwest Bird & Exotic Animal Hospital



American ferrets have an average life span of 5 to 7 years. Ferrets start to show old age or geriatric problems after they are 3 years of age. We feel that this is a good time to recommend some extra veterinary care as well as special home care to try to catch disease problems early, so they can be eliminated or treated. With this “geriatric program,” as we call it, we have been able to prolong life in many pets in a quality manner.

HOME CARE

The pads of the feet in the older ferret may become hard and dry and develop little horny growths. A small amount of Vitamin E crème or oil or Vaseline rubbed on the pads daily will help to keep them soft and remove the excess tissue.

Older ferrets like to sleep for longer periods, so be sure they have a cozy spot to do so in. Please respect that they need more sleep and don't make them play when they don't want to. However, if you should notice a sudden change in sleep habits that seems unusual, please contact your veterinarian.

The hair coat may become drier and more brittle with age. Some diseases can contribute to this, but aging can also cause it. Don't bathe your pet frequently, as this may strip the natural skin oils and worsen the condition. Bathe your pet as infrequently as possible, but no more than once a month (unless you have medical directions to do otherwise), and use a gentle pet shampoo. You may also use special preparations to add moisture back to the skin, such as emollient sprays (Comfi-Spray is a good choice), right after or in between baths. Using a fatty acid supplement, such as Linotone or Ferotone, can also be very helpful. Use 1/8 tsp per ferret per day on the food. If you notice hair loss, skin changes, growths, or excessive scratching please have your pet examined by your veterinarian.

Older ferrets may have less control over their bladder and bowels as they age, so make sure that the litter box or papers are easily available. Put out a few extras if they roam around so they won't have far to go to the bathroom.

Senior citizen may become weak in the hind legs for a variety of reasons, so make sure that they can easily get in and out of their cages and litter boxes. Use ramps, if necessary to help them. Any sudden or unusual weakness or loss of balance should, of course, be brought to the attention of your veterinarian.

Your veterinarian may recommend changing your pet to a lower protein high quality adult cat food or maintenance diet after the age of five. This puts less stress on the kidneys. The change can be gradual by mixing the original kitten formula with the adult formula over several days. Ferrets will usually convert if you use the same brand of food.

Use a cat hairball laxative at least every third day to help prevent the formation of hairballs in the stomach. Use about 1 inch out of the tube. Brushing your pet will also help to cut down on the amount of hair swallowed.

Make sure that food and water are always available. Going without food for too long could cause the onset of severe weakness or a seizure if your pet is dealing with a blood sugar disorder or kidney disease.

VETERINARY CARE

More frequent checkups are recommended, which include a thorough physical exam. We recommend that this be done every six months. Ferrets develop disease rapidly, especially cancer, kidney and heart disease, and waiting an entire year between visits could prevent the early detection and management of these diseases.

Starting at three years of age, we recommend some additional laboratory work be done. On a healthy animal, we recommend a complete blood cell count and a fasting blood glucose as the minimum work-up (a "mini" geriatric). The pet should be fasted 4 to no more than 6 hours prior to the blood tests being taken. This routine laboratory work should be done at least once a year.

Your veterinarian may also wish to do additional laboratory work such as a blood chemistry profile and/or an x-ray for additional information, particularly if your pet is exhibiting signs of illness. Sedation may be necessary for the x-ray. We use isoflurane gas anesthesia on our ferret patients which is very safe and eliminates the stress the pet may feel with these procedures.

After the age of 7, diagnostic testing may have to be done every 6 months along with the semiannual exam. These laboratory workups have been **INVALUABLE** in detecting many diseases early and thus facilitating treatment.

Please keep up with the annual canine distemper vaccination. The older ferrets can contract distemper just as easily as the youngsters. Continue with annual rabies boosters also.

Heartworm preventative should also be continued if your pet is kept outdoors or is taken outdoors frequently in the spring and summer.

Tartar can be cleaned off the teeth easily when the animal is anesthetized with isoflurane for the geriatric work-up. This prevents gum and tooth disease.

Unfortunately, neoplasia (cancer) is the most common cause of disease and death in the older American ferret. We estimate that well over 75% of all ferrets in our area will develop some form of cancer in their life time. The only way to combat all forms of cancer is with early detection and then appropriate therapy. We must emphasize the **EARLY** detection is the key, which emphasizes the need for frequent exams and laboratory work. Below are outlined four of the most common types of cancer seen in the older pets.

LYPHOSARCOMA

This cancer is not restricted to old ferrets. It also may occur in young animals. In many ferrets it tends to hide unnoticed with no signs for months or years and then suddenly appearing a variety of forms. It is a cancer of the lymphatic system, which is part of the body's immune system. The cause is suspected to be a virus. Although much is still unknown, the theory is that the virus is initially transmitted from mother to kit where it may lay dormant for a long period before causing a problem. Transmission between adult animals may also

possible, but the method of transmission is not completely understood. At this point in time it does not appear to be highly transmissible between adults.

Signs vary, and as already stated, many animals have no outward signs for a long period of time. Disease in these animals may be detected by abnormalities in the complete blood cell count. Noticeable changes in other animals may include any of the following signs: swollen lymph nodes, enlarged spleen (there are many causes of enlarged spleens, and in some cases it may be “normal”), wasting, lethargy, frequent illnesses (such as “colds”), poor appetite, difficulty breathing, chronic diarrhea or hind limb weakness.

The diagnosis is made from a combination of a complete blood cell count and either a biopsy of a lymph node, a bone marrow biopsy, x-rays, or biopsies of other affected areas.

Treatment is achieved through chemotherapy, the details of which can be discussed with your veterinarian. WE have had about a 50% success rate with chemotherapy with life being prolonged for 6 months to 5 years post treatment. Most ferrets tolerate the therapy very well and have few side effects. Even those cases that are not good chemotherapy candidates may be helped to continue a quality life with the use of nutritional therapy and corticosteroids.

INSULINOMA

This is one of the most common cancers that we see. At least 50% or more of the ferrets over three years of age will develop this disease. It is a cancer of the beta cells of the pancreas (the cells that produce insulin). This cancer causes these cells to produce abnormally high levels of insulin. This increase in insulin has the effect of driving the sugar out of the blood stream and into the body's cells at too rapid of a rate. This causes a dangerous decrease in the blood sugar level. The brain, which needs a constant large supply of sugar, then becomes sugar starved and begins behaving in an erratic manner. The abnormally functioning brain provides most of the signs that we see with insulinoma. Early in the disease, the body counteracts the sugar drop by producing more sugar from the liver which then temporarily corrects the problem, so symptoms are very subtle. As the disease progresses, and the body is less able to cope with the situation, the signs become more severe and last longer.

Early signs of the disease are usually no more noticeable than seeing the ferret stare blankly into space for a few seconds and then return to normal. He may be a little more difficult to awaken from his naps. As the disease progresses, however, the signs become more specific and may include the following: drooling or salivating, pawing frantically at the mouth (all these signs are probably caused by a feeling of nausea when the sugar drops), extreme lethargy, seizures and finally coma and death.

The diagnosis is based on a fasting blood sugar level. The pet should be fasted for a minimum of 4 to no longer than 6 hours. Occasionally it may also be necessary to run blood insulin levels at the same time.

Treatment depends on the stage of the disease and the overall condition of the pet. Usually, surgery is the first treatment choice. The tumor or tumors are removed and further medication may be unnecessary or at least delayed for some time. When surgery is not possible for whatever reason or in cases here the disease returns despite surgery, then medical management is indicated. This involved a good quality, high protein diet always available, and the use of protein snacks such as cooked meat and egg scraps or strained meat baby food. The addition of Brewer's yeast in the amount of 1/8 to 1/4 tsp of the powder or 1/8 to 1/4 of a chewable tablet two times daily with food has also been helpful to stabilize glucose levels. Brewer's yeast contains chromium which is known as the glucose tolerance factor because it helps to stabilize blood glucose and insulin swings. No sugary treats should be given, as this may make the problem worse. When diet no longer controls the signs, then the pet may have to be put on corticosteroids and/or Proglycem which is an insulin blocking agent. Treatment will be for life.