

# **NUTRITION AND YOUR PET FERRET**

*What to Feed, What Not to Feed, How to Tell the Difference*

*by*

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## **Introduction:**

The domestic ferret is the third most popular carnivorous pet, after the dog and the cat. It is rapidly becoming the “pet of choice” for many people looking for an alternative companion animal.

Why are they becoming so popular? The domestic ferret is a highly intelligent, fun loving pet. One that can be litter trained, taken for walks around the block (OK, at least dragged), affectionate, interactive with dogs and cats and other animals. The ferret will even adopt humans without prejudice! In a home where there are two or more ferrets, TV is obsolete as an object for entertainment.

So what is missing in this ideal pet of the 90’s and the third millennium? The right food!!

Selecting the exact ferret to fit an individual’s personality and lifestyle is the only choice more important than selecting the proper food. Food will have the greatest impact on its health and overall well-being. At the same time, it can give the adopted owner and care giver peace of mind.

## **What to Feed**

Ferrets, like both dogs and cats, are carnivores and as such, require high quality food made of animal proteins and fats as the basis of their daily diet. The food must be fresh to attract the ferret to eat it, nutritious for easy digestion and efficiently utilized to minimize stool and odor. A well balanced quality food is required to build and maintain a healthy body with strong muscles and supporting bones and an effective immune system to lessen the impact of stress and disease.

Food, unlike medicine, cannot cure a disease yet feeding a poor diet can predispose your pet ferret to poor health that can lead to diseases and unhealthy body conditions.

## **Basic Nutrition**

All living organisms are made up of complex bio-molecules, which in turn, make up the food we eat, as well as all the animals which eat the food. These bio-molecules including individual nutrients such as calcium, phosphorous, thiamin (B1) l-Lysine, etc., make up the nutrients in the form of food which is required to sustain life. The ferret requires some 65 different nutrients, which are subdivided into 7 major categories – proteins, fats, simple carbohydrates, complex carbohydrates, vitamins, minerals and water.

*Proteins* are made of building blocks, known as amino acids. The amino acids that come from animal protein are more easily digested and utilized by the ferret because they match its own body needs more exactly than those coming from vegetable proteins. *Fats* are also made of individual building blocks, known as fatty acids and as with proteins, are best for the ferret if they come from animal sources. *It is this genetic fact that classifies ferrets as carnivores and makes it imperative that they receive food made from animal sources.*

*Carbohydrates*, both simple and complex, are only required to make the food in a form which ferrets recognize and like to eat. Simple carbohydrates such as starches also furnish energy which in turn reduces the energy requirements needed from proteins and fat. Complex carbohydrates like fiber, are poorly digested by ferrets and excess can cause loose and foul stools.

*Vitamins and minerals* are required mainly as metabolic regulators and must be in the correct balance and levels with all other nutrients if they are to function properly. This is why excess supplementation with vitamins and minerals can cause more harm than good. Without the knowledge and understanding of how these work with one another, it is possible to develop toxic levels of these nutrients within your ferret.

*Water* of course is required by all animals for life and provides a medium for nutrient transport within and among the cells. A fresh, clean, non-contaminated source of water is very important to ferrets as well as all animals.

## Tested

In selecting a food for your pet ferret, look for one that has been designed and tested for and on ferrets. The package should have a nutritional guarantee and stated clearly as “...complete and balanced for all stages of a ferret’s life as determined in actual animal feeding test.”

Some foods, albeit, somewhat misleading, are called “ferret food” but are really modified mink diets. These are easily detected by their strong fish odor plus they will list fish meal or some type of fish as one of the top three ingredients on the label. Most of these foods have not been tested in actual ferret feeding studies and as such, may not be adequate for the active lifestyle of the ferret.

Though both cat and dog foods have been fed to ferrets with mixed results, the fact remains that they do not meet the ferret’s unique nutritional requirements.

How do you know if a food has been tested? If the package does not indicate it has actually been fed and tested, it probably has not. If you are not sure, call the manufacturer and ask. The manufacturer should confidently assure you that adequate testing has been successfully completed. A ferret food that says **complete and balanced** but does not say it has been tested in animal studies on ferrets, should not be fed.

## Guaranteed Analysis

A food that has been developed for ferrets for all of their life stages, should contain a minimum of 36% protein and 22% fat, plus a maximum of 2% fiber. This includes young growing and active male and female ferrets. Since ferrets are generally active during most of their life, even older ferrets do well on this level of protein and fat. If they begin to show a weight gain, simply reduce their food intake (this includes snacks and treats) and be sure they keep up their activity level. Lower protein and fat foods may be an alternative way to control overeating, however for now, this has not been proven.

It is important to point out that ferrets do a poor job of digesting fiber. Since they are obligate carnivores and are unlike most animals, they have a very short digestive tract and lack a caecum, which helps digest fiber. Ferrets also have a large intestine that is very inefficient at nutrient and water re-absorption, which further decreases the utilization of fiber and other nutrients as well. Most dry cat foods and all dry dog foods exceed 3% fiber, which leads to very large, smelly stools when fed to ferrets. Further, this is questionable practice because these foods have not been nutritionally tested and are not complete foods for ferrets.

## What to Look For

Ingredients – The sources of protein and fat are the most important considerations in selecting a quality ferret food. The ferret owner should review the ingredient panel of the food very carefully to determine if it contains the best ingredients which will supply the key nutrients.

Chicken and poultry by-product meal, meat meal, whole eggs, liver, poultry or animal by-products, are all excellent primary sources of protein for ferrets. Chicken and/or poultry by-product meal or whole chicken meat should always be the first ingredient of a quality ferret food. Two or more of the other protein sources, such as whole eggs, liver meal or meat meal, should be listed 4<sup>th</sup> and/or 5<sup>th</sup> as secondary protein sources. Either a high quality simple carbohydrate such as rice flour or brewers rice should be the second or third ingredient. These furnish simple carbohydrates, which help give the food the correct texture for the best taste, plus it improves the digestibility of the food. Fat from chicken, poultry or animal should be the third or fourth ingredient. Other important and useful fat sources like vegetable oils, lecithin, corn oil, or fish oil should also be present but further down the list. Wheat, corn or the flours of these grains may also be listed but generally should not be higher than the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> ingredient from the top of the list.

Some fish protein, such as herring meal, should be listed further down the ingredient panel because it provides high quality protein to offer nutritional balance. The vitamins, minerals, as well as individual amino acids such as lysine, methionine and taurine will also be listed toward the bottom of the label.

## What Not to Feed

Ferrets, like their adopted humans, will eat a lot of different foods, snacks, treats, as well as non-food items that are not good for them. Food items with sugar, chocolate, milk or high fiber should not be fed as food, snacks or treats.

Since ferrets are carnivores, they do not digest vegetables or fruits like bananas, raisins, apples or other high fibrous foods which humans love to offer as “treats” and/or “snacks.” Most ferrets will not refuse such a snack, but they offer no nutritional benefit over a well-balanced dry food. They are simply “feel good foods,” mainly for the humans giving them.

Will an occasional snack from this list hurt? Not if in moderation. But, generally, it is best not to even begin feeding such snacks as it can easily be overdone (which most often does happen). Treats such as puffed or flaked corn, wheat or oat cereal without sugar or milk coatings are good, occasional snack foods, if you feel you must give something.

Supplements, such as oils, with and without vitamins and minerals, nutritional tablets, enzymes or powders, regardless if they are for ferrets, cats or dogs, should not be necessary if a proper tested and balanced food is being fed. Generally, your veterinarian can also help you better select a proper food when your ferret is under stress, overcoming surgery or experiencing an illness.

Other foods or ingredients to avoid are those that begin with, or even contain a high level of vegetable protein, such as soy flour, soybean meal, corn gluten meal, or wheat gluten. They should NEVER be fed to a ferret. A food that lists the ingredients in categories as “animal protein products,” “plant protein products,” or other “collective” terminology should never be fed to ferrets or any other companion animal. These are non-specific, least cost formulas and usually contain many ingredients that are of poor quality for ferrets. Any ingredient that is not understood should be explained by the manufacturer BEFORE you feed the food. Call and ask.

Ferret foods in plastic bags generally are pelleted, which means the carbohydrates are not cooked as well as the extruded foods, contain low quality ingredients, have a low fat content and should not be fed to ferrets. Many of these foods are modified mink diets and have not generally been fully tested and proven on ferrets. In addition, ferrets do not eat these or other pelleted foods very well and they should be avoided if possible.

## Conclusion

Selecting a ferret food which has been developed, tested and proven on ferrets is a must. Selecting one that has quality animal protein and fat source ingredients as their primary ingredients is the next step in evaluating a food. The types of carbohydrates, level of fiber and the presence of vitamins and minerals are all necessary for a balanced food.

Knowing the differences is important to your ferret and its health and well-being, as well as you, its companion and caregiver.

Ultimately, the quality of any food is best measured by the animal eating it. How the pet performs on the food, how it looks, feels and acts are the best measures of the quality of any food. A pet with bright eyes, silky hair and supple skin, who is not overweight, has well-formed small stools without a strong odor, is the goal. No matter what else a company may say or do, unless the food performs in this manner for your pet, it's not right for him or you.

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