

Ferret Husbandry

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Ferrets are complex little creatures and are interactive members of the household that need and value interaction with their families. They can build social and cognitive bonds similar to those we associate with dogs and cats.

Owning a ferret, especially a young kit, is much like having a puppy in the house – except they never grow up! Ferrets normally play hard and will commonly use their mouths to grab and hold things. This mouthiness is not a form of aggression, just a normal, energetic ferret. Like puppies, ferrets need to be taught what acceptable play is and what is too rough for human skin.

The intelligent and curious nature of ferrets does not lend itself to many hours in a small cage. Although ferrets may be caged for their own safety, they do require large amounts of time out of cage to exercise, explore, and play. A minimum of 3-4 hours per day of interactive, social playtime should be provided. Ferrets are social creatures, and usually thrive in a multi-ferret household, with the number in the business (a grouping of ferrets, like a flock of sheep) determined primarily by the space and resources provided to them by their owners. Confining ferrets to a cage for 20 hours per day is similar to confining a young Lab puppy to a crate for the same period of time; it does not provide adequate room nor stimulation. Caging a ferret is similar to crate training a puppy and done often for safety purposes but not as a way of life.

Housing

Cages, if used, should be large and multi-story since ferrets enjoy climbing and having high vantage points. A rough rule of thumb is that a single ferret cage should be a minimum of 3 feet high, 3 feet wide, and 2 feet deep. As the number of ferrets increases, so must the cage size as well as the amount of out of cage time provided. In larger businesses (more than 5 animals) a small spare bedroom provides adequate space.

Caging and ferret areas should be provided with ample soft bedding for hiding, sleeping, and playing. They are usually relatively easily litter box trained (at least for the most part) and boxes should be placed in the corner of the cage where the ferret likes to go. There is no need to place recycled paper products (such as Carefresh) in the majority of the cage, unless you are unable/unwilling to litter train.

All wire footing surfaces (ramps, floors) should be covered with soft materials to prevent injury. Inspect cages for possible sources of injury as well as appropriate spacing between the bars. Just because a cage is marketed for a given species does NOT mean that it is safe or ideal for that species!

Bedding in the cage will need to be laundered several times weekly to remove the body oils and odor associated with ferrets.

Ferrets kept in clean cages and fed an appropriate diet and who are relatively healthy will have a minor amount of body odor. A smelly, greasy ferret either has an underlying health condition or a dirty cage at home. Ferrets should have access to at least one more sleeping spot than there are ferrets in the area – so three ferrets must have four sleeping spots to choose from and so on. Sleeping spots can be hammocks, sleep sacks, beds, hanging pouches, and so on. Often ferrets prefer to "pile sleep," but should have the option to sleep solo.

Litter pans can be filled with any variety of non-edible, non-clumping, and odor-absorbing litter. My personal preference is wood stove pellets (inexpensive and safe), but a variety of commercial ferret litters are available. Ferrets produce a lot of stool, having a short digestive tract. Boxes should be scooped daily and cleaned/changed quite regularly.

Out of cage time is sometimes the most difficult time for the owner, given that ferrets are both curious and intelligent. If a ferret can get its head through something, the body can follow! Small holes around plumbing that would otherwise go unnoticed are often found by ferrets. Most ferrets are quick to open cupboards, exposing them to items like household chemicals and other unhealthy surprises considered "locked up" by the owners. Since ferrets can also climb, they often can and will access items placed high such as windowsills, closet shelves, and counter tops.

Similarly, they can get into and under furniture items and become injured, and recliners are particularly deadly. Calls for ferrets stuck in the walls, under bathtubs, and in appliances are common. It is critical for owners to review the area frequented by the ferrets carefully from floor level and make it completely safe.

Areas that cannot be adequately ferret proofed should be blocked off by a closed door or Plexiglas gate (ferrets will climb baby gates). Since they are fast, owners must ensure a system is in place to prevent escape when someone enters or exits the house. A ferret that leaves the house is likely a dead ferret.

Perhaps one of the most common, and potentially life threatening, behavior problems is their unique ability to creatively access any area they decide they want to go. Common sense is lacking in young ferrets and the need for exploration far exceeds the sense of danger. Owners must be constantly vigilant to stay one step ahead of the ferret on an unintentional suicide mission. This situation can be frustrating to the owner and deadly to the ferret. It is not acceptable to just consistently confine them to a cage; rather you must develop "ferret safe" areas in the house and provide adequate mental stimulation to entertain them.

Safety tip: Ferrets will do anything they can to find trouble.

Other Pets

Ferrets are predatory creatures, and small pets such as rodents and birds may be in jeopardy from the playful advances of a predator. Similarly, ferrets are petite and can easily be injured by family dogs. Cats may also provide a risk, but sometimes cats stalk ferrets and sometimes ferrets stalk cats.

Either way, the interaction must be closely monitored.

Diet

Diet is an important, and often overlooked, aspect of ferret care. They need a high protein, moderate to high fat, and low carbohydrate diet of high quality. It is critical for their health.

Ferrets are obligate carnivores, and as such, have specific nutrient needs. Unfortunately, ferrets also have strong preferences, and not always for what is best for them – and it can be difficult for owners to convert an adult ferret to an appropriate diet. Also unfortunate is that the higher quality ferret foods are expensive, leading many owners to feed a lower quality cat food. Although cats are also obligate carnivores, they can digest a higher carbohydrate load than is ideal for ferrets. Therefore, while ferrets can survive on cat food, a high-quality ferret kibble is preferable.

Protein requirements are high (32-38%), and they cannot properly digest vegetable proteins. In general, proteins from poultry meat/poultry by-products are considered the most nutritious. Secondary sources, such as meat meal, whole eggs, and liver meal may be included as well. Avoid vegetable proteins (soy, corn, cereal grains). Fish-based proteins result in exceptionally smelly stool and a greasy hair coat, and while they may be nutritious, they tend to be unpleasant for you.

At no time should diets containing dried fruits, vegetables, or seeds be fed to ferrets: not only do they have no nutritional benefit, they can cause intestinal obstructions.

Ferrets also have an unusually high need for fat in their diets (20-23%). Poultry should be the primary source of this fat, with little or none of it coming from vegetable sources (such as corn oil, lecithin, or vegetable oil). Similarly, beef tallow is not easily digested by them.

Ferrets have little use for carbohydrates and fiber. A high quality, simple carbohydrate (such as brewer's rice or rice flour) is appropriate, but corn and wheat flours are not easily digested. Fiber levels should be at 2% or less; allowing the ferret to absorb more nutrients and eliminate less waste. Beet pulp is a common source of fiber for ferrets.

Taurine supplementation is necessary, and they may have a higher need for vitamin A than many of our traditional pet species.

Ferrets are about as good at getting treats out of their owners as Labrador retrievers are. They are completely unwilling to acknowledge that some of their favorite snacks simply are not good for them. Healthy treats that can be incorporated on a daily basis include small amounts of unseasoned lean meats and organ meats, cooked eggs, homemade turkey/salmon/beef jerky, insects (mealworms, earthworms, crickets, as you would feed a reptile), killed prey animals (small rats, mice, chicks), chicken/turkey baby food, fatty acid and vitamin supplements (Ferretone, Furotone), and dental care treats (N-bone Ferret Chew Sticks and Zupreem Dental Sticks Ferret Treats).

Fleas and Heartworms

Only one flea preventive is available for use specifically for ferrets only: Advantage II for Ferrets. Anything else is off label, meaning it is treatment for a condition for which it has not been officially approved. Before this ferret-specific product came on the market, ferrets were given cat products.

Only one drug, Advantage Multi for Cats (imidacloprid and moxidectin), is approved to **prevent** heartworms in ferrets. No drugs are FDA-approved to **treat** heartworm disease in this species. Talk to your ferret veterinarian about the use of off-label drugs for treatment.

Grooming

Perhaps the most important aspect of home care involves toenail trimming. Young ferrets have rapidly growing, sharp toenails. If not trimmed on a regular basis, these nails not only damage you and your furniture, but will also get snagged in bedding and toys. Many ferrets have broken toes and sometimes even self-amputated limbs with overgrown toenails.

As ferrets age, their nails generally grow more slowly and become thicker, so the risks lessen slightly. For young animals, however, nail trimming might be necessary on a weekly basis. As the animals age, it may be necessary to trim only every second or third week.

Nail trimming and ear cleaning can be done without a battle when you give the animal a small amount of either Furotone or Nutrical to lick off their belly. This magic "ferret crack" manages to distract them into complete compliance with no restraint needed. This allows most owners to easily trim nails as needed at home.

I prefer using the small, flat nippers many people use on their own nails; my technicians usually use the White style trimmers commonly used on cats. The nails are usually clear and the blood line easily visible, making trimming a routine and simple process.

Ferret ears also require regular grooming care. Many ferrets are prone to a lot of ear wax, which, if left alone, may result in inflammation. Although not all ferrets are bothered by ear wax, some benefit from regular ear cleaning. I clean ears gently with a small cotton swab moistened with a commercial ear cleaner safe for cats. Signs of a diseased ear include redness, pain, odor, pus, itchiness, etc. Not all ferrets need their ears cleaned, even though all ferrets appear to produce a lot of ear wax.

Dental Needs

Ferrets are prone to dental disease, and many are amenable to having their teeth brushed at home either with a commercial toothbrushing kit used in cats or with a gauze dipped in flavored commercial pet toothpaste.

Bathing

Many owners feel they need to bathe their ferret because of the smell. In reality, overbathing causes the ferret to release more coat oils, and generally will increase the smell. If a ferret has a strong smell, it is either being kept in a dirty cage, being fed a poor (fish based) diet, or has a health issue. Well cared for healthy ferrets have a minimal smell. In general, ferrets do not need to be bathed any more frequently than the average house cat. If necessary, a mild shampoo such as Johnson and Johnson natural baby shampoo is appropriate. Bathing should not be done more than monthly, if at all.

Many ferrets, however, tremendously enjoy simply playing in water or snow – and most owners will allow them that opportunity on a regular basis without the oil stripping effect of shampoos and chemicals. They will dry themselves by slithering through towels on the floor, thinking they have gotten away with something and created an awesome new game.