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FERRET DISEASES

Ferrets are susceptible to a number of diseases, most notably canine distemper, which is considered 100% fatal. Ferrets can be protected from distemper by vaccination. After three years of age, ferrets become prone to several "geriatric" diseases including adrenal neoplasia, polycystic kidneys, lymphosarcoma, insulinoma and skin neoplasia.

Aplastic anemia: Female ferrets that are not spayed and not allowed to breed can quickly develop a fatal anemia. We recommend spaying before eight months of age, but not before six months (to potentially prevent adrenal tumors).

Green Virus Diarrhea: An infectious disease thought to be caused by a coronavirus. Very infectious. No preventive measures are effective. Supportive care with fluids and liquid is the most important component of survival.

Annual veterinary examinations to monitor for disease and general wellbeing are important for the health of your ferret.

When your ferret reaches three years of age, we recommend an annual geriatric examination which consists of:

Physical Examination to evaluate your ferret's heart and lung sounds, body temperature, weight and general condition.

4-6 hour Fasting Blood Panel and Glucose/Insulinoma Test to check for kidney or liver disease, infection or other degenerative conditions sometimes associated with advancing age.

Booster Vaccinations against canine distemper and rabies.

Optional Test may include urinalysis and stool culture.

The above Geriatric Examination may require a short stay so your ferret can wake up gently from anesthesia.

Abnormalities in any of the above tests may lead to further diagnostics such as:

Ultrasonography

Cardiography/echocardiography

Electrocardiogram

Tumors in Pet Ferrets

Pet ferrets suffer from an unusually high incidence of cancer, especially pancreatic and adrenal tumors. It is estimated that 30 to 40 percent of ferrets over the age of three have one or both tumor types. For this reason, we recommend twice yearly examinations of all ferrets over the age of three. Early detection can aid in treatment of these tumors and prevent complications associated with a grave prognosis.

Pancreatic tumors or insulinoma

Tumors of the pancreas produce an oversupply of insulin causing low blood sugar. Early signs include periodic weakness, weak hindquarters, profuse salivating, staring blankly into space and weight loss. In advanced cases ferrets are depressed for long periods of time, may seizure or go into a coma. Diagnosis is based on demonstrating low blood sugar levels after a 4-5 hour fast.

There are several treatments for pancreatic tumors:

Surgery to remove tumors. Some are easily removed and some are so small and scattered complete removal is impossible. During surgery a complete exploratory is done to look for other tumors or abnormalities.

Dietary therapy. Small frequent, high protein meals are fed including meat baby food, cooked meat or high protein feline supplements such as A/D.

In addition to surgery and dietary therapy, one or more drugs may be added to help blood sugar elevation.

Adrenal Tumors

Tumors of the adrenal gland can be one of several tumor types. Early signs of cancer may include symmetrical hair loss, thinning skin, itchiness, and swelling of the vulva. Male ferrets can additionally become unable to urinate. Muscles wasting and mild to severe depression are seen in advanced cases. Diagnosis is difficult because there are few tests for this disease. Diagnosis is confirmed at surgery.

Treatment options include:

Surgery to remove cancerous adrenal gland. An exploratory is preformed to rule out spread and other tumor types.

Drug therapy to destroy tumor. The drug is only effective against certain types of tumors and is not recommended for ferrets who also have pancreatic tumors.

Lymphoma

Tumor of the lymph node system. Signs of lymphoma depend on how extensive the individual tumor is and where it is causing problems. A tumor in the chest is sometimes fatal due to the severe affect it has on breathing. Most of the time the tumor will cause a weakened and ineffective immune system or organ damage. Chemotherapy is instituted to put this cancer in remission after extensive blood work is performed to see if the body can handle the medication. No surgical cure generally.