



AGAVE VETERINARY CARE  
AND EXOTIC ANIMAL HOSPITAL

## **Your Complete Ferret Care Guide**

### What veterinary care will your ferret need?

You should have your ferret examined by your veterinarian within 48 hours of adoption. Most ferrets in the United States come from Marshall Farms and therefore should be desexed, descented and have been given their first Distemper vaccination prior to adoption. Ferrets need two additional doses of Distemper vaccine and a Rabies vaccine after adoption. Going forward your ferret will receive these vaccines yearly.

- Canine Distemper Virus is a disease that is transmitted either by direct or indirect contact with an animal that has been infected. Indirect contact could mean being carried through the air, shoes, clothes or on skin. The disease is common in wildlife and domestic dogs and is almost 100% fatal. Symptoms include coughing, sneezing, discharge from the eyes and nose, inappetence, diarrhea, abnormal behavior, seizures and death.
- Rabies is a contagious disease that can be spread by most mammals. The state of Texas strongly encourages ferret owners to have their ferrets vaccinated against this disease to protect against rabies transmission. Rabies disease is 100% fatal once symptoms develop.

Ferrets are at higher risk of vaccine reactions (about 6%) than dogs and cats (0.4%). Vaccine reactions typically occur within thirty minutes of vaccination and cause lethargy, hypersalivation, vomiting, and diarrhea. The reactions can be life threatening, especially if untreated. To reduce the risk of reaction, the Distemper and Rabies vaccines are not given on the same day, and the ferret should remain at the veterinarian for thirty minutes after the vaccine to monitor for any problems. If your ferret does have a reaction, your veterinarian will be able to treat them immediately.

### What should your ferret eat?

Ferrets are carnivores and therefore need a meat-based diet; they require high levels of protein and fat in their diet. You can find a high quality ferret diet at most pet stores that meet these requirements; Oxbow Animal Health Ferret Food is a great option. Recent evidence suggests

that foods containing red lentils and chickpeas contribute to the formation of bladder stones in ferrets, so avoid these ingredients. Ferrets have a high metabolism and can be prone to low blood sugar (hypoglycemia) and therefore always need food available. Avoid diet changes unless necessary as this can cause gastrointestinal upset. Make sure to gradually introduce the new diet if changes need to be made.

Sipper bottles are best for water as they attach to the side of the cage and are not easily tipped over. Make sure you are cleaning and replacing their water source daily.

### How should you house your ferret?

Ferrets are very active and social animals and should spend a minimum of 3-4 hours outside of their cage a day, the longer the better. Think of their cage like a crate for a dog, a place where they can sleep and relax when unsupervised but not a place they should live the majority of their life. When your ferret spends time outside of their cage it is important to “ferret proof” the space. Due to their very curious nature, they will try to squeeze and explore even the smallest of areas. If your ferret can fit their head through a space, they can fit their whole body! Ferrets will often get themselves into tiny areas that can get them stuck or even hurt!

Ferrets should have a large cage with multiple stories. This allows for plenty of space to sleep, potty, and to eat/drink. Provide soft bedding for hiding and sleeping. Cover all floors and ramps that are made of wire with a soft material such as fleece to prevent your ferret from injuring themselves. You will want to wash all bedding placed in your ferret’s cage a couple times a week to prevent the odor becoming too strong.

You can litter box train your ferret! They will typically urinate and defecate in the same area, usually away from where they sleep and eat, so make sure you place the litter pan away from their beds and food. Do not use a clumping litter as the dust can cause upper respiratory issues in your ferret.

Do not house your ferrets with any other species, especially rabbits, guinea pigs, and hamsters. Ferrets are carnivores and can cause serious injury to other pets. It is also important to never leave your ferret unattended with dogs or cats; they may seem to be friendly when under supervision but should never be trusted unsupervised.

### What grooming will your ferret need?

People often think it's necessary to bathe their ferrets due to their odor, but bathing too frequently can actually cause them to have a stronger odor. You shouldn't have to bathe your ferret more than once a month. And when bathing, use a gentle shampoo like one formulated for small animals or kittens.

Your ferret will also need their nails trimmed monthly as well, sometimes more frequently depending on how quickly their nails grow. Like other animals, ferrets have a blood supply in their nails so it is important to trim slowly. Luckily, ferret nails are typically clear and it is much easier to visualize the blood supply. If you trim too much, don't panic! You can use a styptic powder (purchased from a pet store) or cornstarch to stop the bleeding.

### What health concerns should you look out for?

Unfortunately, ferrets are prone to a variety of different diseases, including cancer. Ferrets tend to hide illnesses until they are advanced. Lethargy and weakness are big indicators that something may be wrong with your ferret. Since ferrets are typically very rambunctious animals, lethargy is a sign of them feeling ill. The following are common health concerns in ferret:

- Insulinoma
  - An insulinoma is a tumor in the pancreas and is unfortunately common in ferrets over the age of 3. Symptoms that might indicate that your ferret has an insulinoma include weakness, lethargy, increased salivation and partial paralysis of their hind legs. Insulinomas cause the body to produce more insulin than it needs, resulting in hypoglycemia (low blood sugar). If your ferret shows signs of hypoglycemia, they need to be seen by your veterinarian as soon as possible.
- Ferret adrenal disease
  - Ferret adrenal disease is caused by the overproduction of sex hormones by the adrenal gland. The most common symptom is hair loss or thinning beginning at the tail and going up towards the head. Because ferrets also experience seasonal changes to their coats, it is difficult to differentiate as an owner. If you notice any hair loss or thinning on your ferret at home, it is best to speak to your veterinarian.
- Foreign Body
  - As mentioned above, ferrets are very curious and will commonly ingest foreign objects and that can cause a blockage in the intestines or stomach.

Ferret-proofing your home and keeping a close eye on them is very important. You should take your ferret to the vet if you notice loss of appetite, hypersalivation, diarrhea, or abdominal pain. X-Ray images will be taken to determine if there is a blockage. Surgery is commonly required to remove the foreign object.

- Bladder Stones
  - Ferrets can develop bladder stones or crystals in their urine. Diet typically plays a big role in the development of these bladder stones. Feeding dog or cat food or a diet containing plant based proteins can contribute. It is important to avoid diets that contain red lentils or garbanzo beans. Signs that your ferret may have bladder stones include straining to urinate, pain while urinating, bloody urine, or foul smelling urine. You may also notice a loss in appetite, weakness and lethargy.

#### Works Cited

“About Ferrets (by STAR\*Ferrets).” *Ferret Central*, 22 March 1995,

<http://www.ferretcentral.org/for-others/overview.html>. Accessed 28 July 2023.

“For New Ferret Owners or Anyone Considering a Ferret as a Pet.” *American Ferret*

*Association*, <https://www.ferret.org/read/new-to-ferrets.html>. Accessed 28 July 2023.

Greenacre CB. Incidence of adverse events in ferrets vaccinated with distemper or rabies vaccine: 143 cases (1995-2001). *J Am Vet Med Assoc*. 2003 Sep 1;223(5):663-5. doi: 10.2460/javma.2003.223.663. PMID: 12959385.

Mitchell, Sandra. “Ferret Husbandry - Veterinary Partner.” *Veterinary Partner*, 15 December

2020, <https://veterinarypartner.vin.com/default.aspx?pid=19239&id=9994900>. Accessed 7 July 2023.

Morrisey, James K. “Introduction to Ferrets.” *Merck Veterinary Manual*, 2020,

[https://www.merckvetmanual.com/all-other-pets/ferrets?\\_gl=1\\*1hhjz2u\\*\\_up\\*MQ..&gclid=CjwKCAjw44mlBhAQEiwAqP3eVpbk9xUfaFtwwHXAsjt-DBamYgFeuMgqGO2kLK\\_7dRb4bbM8KDtjSxoCiAkQAvD\\_BwE&gclsrc=aw.ds](https://www.merckvetmanual.com/all-other-pets/ferrets?_gl=1*1hhjz2u*_up*MQ..&gclid=CjwKCAjw44mlBhAQEiwAqP3eVpbk9xUfaFtwwHXAsjt-DBamYgFeuMgqGO2kLK_7dRb4bbM8KDtjSxoCiAkQAvD_BwE&gclsrc=aw.ds). Accessed 28 July 2023.

Rich, Gregory, and Rick Axelson. "Owning a Ferret." *VCA Animal Hospitals*,

<https://vcahospitals.com/know-your-pet/owning-a-ferret>. Accessed 28 July 2023.

Tizard IR. Adverse consequences of vaccination. *Vaccines for Veterinarians*.

2021:115–130.e1. doi: 10.1016/B978-0-323-68299-2.00019-8. Epub 2020

Jul 10. PMID: PMC7348619.

"Urinary Tract 'Stones' in Ferrets." *PetMD*, 22 June 2010,

[https://www.petmd.com/ferret/conditions/urinary/c\\_ft\\_urolithiasis](https://www.petmd.com/ferret/conditions/urinary/c_ft_urolithiasis). Accessed 28 July 2023.

"Urolithiasis: Diagnosing Urinary Tract Obstructions in Ferrets." *MiDOG*, 23 March 2021,

<https://www.midogtest.com/post/urolithiasis-ferrets>. Accessed 28 July 2023.