

Your Ferret's First Visit

Association of Exotic Mammal Veterinarians: aemv.org



Introduction. The domestic ferret, *Mustela putorius furo*, is a descendent of the European polecat. Ferrets tend to be gentle, energetic, playful pets. A healthy ferret is alert, inquisitive and bright eyed. Ferrets may appear slightly lethargic immediately after awakening, but should respond to handling in a few minutes. Juvenile ferrets can be “nippy” and should not be left alone with small children. Although the ferret is one of the most common pets in the United States, they are still illegal in some areas. Check with your local authorities about any legal restrictions concerning ferrets

Nutrition. Ferrets are carnivores with a very high metabolic rate, and should have food and fresh water available constantly. Water bottles are less messy than dishes. The diet must contain mostly meat and animal products, as the digestive tract of the ferret is not designed to process grains, foods high in fiber and/or protein from plant sources. Most commercial ferret diets are formulated with these requirements in mind. A quality ferret diet should be 32 to 36% crude protein and 20 to 22% fat. When reading the pet food label, the first items listed should be animal proteins such as chicken or poultry by-products. Homemade formulations should be avoided as they often fail to meet ferret dietary requirements. While ferrets appear to enjoy fruits, vegetables and other similar treats, these should be fed in moderation or not at all.

Housing. Provide the largest cage that space and budget will allow. Ferrets especially enjoy climbing multilevel cages. Provide frequent *supervised* play outside the cage. Ferrets can be destructive, and are very prone to chew and ingest soft rubber or foam items, sometimes resulting in potentially fatal gastrointestinal obstruction. As ferrets especially like to eliminate in corners, it is ideal to keep a litter box in the corner of every room or area the ferret can access. Acceptable substrates for the litter box include paper products and regular clay, non-clumping cat litter.

Elective Surgeries. Most ferrets from pet stores come already descented, and castrated or spayed. Although surgery will decrease the ferret's odor, they won't totally eliminate the characteristic musky smell. Ferrets purchased from breeders may not have had these surgeries at the time of purchase. Castration is highly recommend in male ferrets, as intact males can be aggressive, and have an extremely unpleasant body odor. Unspayed Female ferrets that are not allowed to breed will develop a fatal anemia due to excessive estrogen production.

Preventative Medicine. Young ferrets should be vaccinated against canine distemper at approximately 6, 10 and 14 weeks of age and against rabies at 12 weeks of age. Both vaccines should be repeated annually. Canine distemper is considered 100% fatal in ferrets. Many communities now require rabies vaccination in ferrets. Many states now allow vaccinated ferrets that bite humans to be quarantined instead of euthanized to test for rabies. Most veterinarians require ferrets to remain in the hospital 15 to 20 minutes after vaccination to watch for reactions to the vaccines. While most ferrets will not have a reaction to vaccine, some can be severe and require medical intervention.

Ferrets are susceptible to heartworm disease. Owners of ferrets in areas where heartworm disease is common may want to consider monthly heartworm preventative for their pet. Ferrets over the age of three may benefit from yearly dental scaling and cleaning to prevent periodontal disease. Daily brushing with a feline toothbrush and enzymatic paste may be helpful as well.

Ferrets over the age of four should receive yearly radiographs (X-rays) and blood work to help aid early detection of diseases common in older ferrets.

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