

Distemper in Ferrets



Distemper is an airborne virus that is almost always 100% fatal to ferrets if not vaccinated against it. This virus can be picked up from grass, weeds, trees, shrubs, animals, etc. that you come into contact with, and can be transmitted by your other pets, visitors and even yourself. The incubation period can be up to 10 days long, so it is important to isolate any new pets from the household until such time has passed.

The virus is generally shed from the eyes, nasal and oral cavities, urine and feces. First noticeable signs include anorexia, fever, eyes blinking and nasal discharge. The development of a rash can appear on the chin and spread to the groin area which can cause additional infections. The nasal discharge eventually turns into brown encrusted material which grows to encompass the lips, nose, chin and eyes (which usually end up stuck closed). Secondary bacterial infections can develop such as pneumonia and black tarry stools indicating possible gastro-intestinal ulcers. Ferrets who manage to survive long enough develop Central Nervous System complications such as hyper excitability, excessive salivation, muscular tremors, convulsions and coma. Death generally occurs within 12-30 days. Diagnosis is usually based on distinctive clinical signs, and euthanasia is recommended to end the ferret's suffering and the spread of disease.

It is a necessity to protect your ferret from this deadly virus and have them vaccinated with a canine distemper shot. The first shot is generally administered at 8 weeks of age, again at 11-12 weeks, then at 14-16 weeks. Thereafter, your ferret should receive an annual booster.

