

Ferret - Care Sheet

The average life span of a ferret is 6 to 8 years. When fully grown, females weigh about 800 grams (1.5 lbs) while males are generally about 1.2 kg (2.5 lbs). A female's length is about 30 cm (12 inches) nose to tail and the males are about 45 cm (16 inches).

Ferrets come in many colour variations: Most are shades of brown, gray and black with the mask, feet and tail generally being the darkest in colour. The "albino" ferret, the red-eyed white breed was bred for the trait of eye colour. These animals suffer from some vision problems due to this breeding, mostly related to difficulties with bright light.

Behavior

Ferrets are gregarious and are happiest in pairs or larger groups, they have powerful, distinct and engaging personalities, with a playful and fastidious nature. Ferrets have their periods of greatest activity just before sunrise and shortly after sunset. They sleep about eighteen to twenty hours of the day, waking up twice a day for very active periods of about two hours. Due to their very high metabolism, ferrets also wake up roughly every four hours for a few minutes to eat, relieve themselves and play briefly. When they wake, ferrets shiver noticeably for periods of up to twenty minutes. This is normal as the ferret is increasing his body temperature after sleep due to his high metabolism and inherently higher body temperature.

Ferrets require a dark, quiet place to sleep as they are burrow-living animals. Boxes and drawers with bedding of old towels, sweaters, pants and the like are the best types in which they can roll up or bury themselves.

Ferrets are extremely curious and will investigate anything and everything. This curiosity is the leading cause of accidents amongst ferrets. It is important to supervise your ferret at all times when he is at play. When you allow your ferrets to roam about your home, never close refrigerators, washers, driers, etc. without first ensuring no ferrets are exploring or roosting within.

Litter Training

Generally, a ferret will relieve himself within a few minutes of waking up. Ferrets are latrine animals and prefer to use specific areas for this purpose. Being small predators it is their instinct to find a sheltered corner as a latrine, as they would be middle of the food chain in the wild. This makes it possible to litter train a ferret with considerable success.

The ferret should have a litter box or paper placed in a corner near his nest or in his run and be confined to the nest/litter area until after he has relieved himself. Afterwards, if you are allowing your ferret the run of your home, he can be released to play in the rest of the home, as he will not relieve himself again until after his next sleep. The size of the training area can slowly be expanded as the ferret learns to use a specific area, much like paper training a puppy. A litter box can be placed in a secluded, out-of-sight corner with a piece of furniture providing cover on the third side of the box. Place a litter box in each room for the ferret's use, and his natural preferences should guide him to it. The use of a fine, dust-free, clumping litter in a litter box or newspapers is suggested. Remember to clean up daily.



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Play & Nipping

Much like kittens or puppies ferrets are very playful animals, they just never grow up. People unfamiliar with ferret body language are often confused or even frightened by the many behaviours related to play and play "hunting".

The "war dance," is the most common action where the ferret arches his back, throws his head back with fangs bared, often bushing up his tail, and maniacally bounces forward, backwards, sideways, all the while chittering happily away. As seemingly mad as this dance may seem, it is only a challenge to come down to his level and play. If you imitate his actions, he will become more frenzied (hard to imagine though this may be) and start chasing you, stop suddenly, turn and run. Now it's your turn to chase him.

Another common message is pawing the ground while semiprone: This is a challenge to a play fight. Paw the ground yourself, and he will jump at you, and then retreat. A few more bouts of pawing and jumping, and he will attack your hand or wrist, wrestling it down and attempting to "kill" it.

All ferrets have an affinity for people and want to include their family in their play. This is a major bonding component in a ferret's life. The ferrets' thick fur and skin protects them when they play together. Due to his extremely strong jaws and small, sharp teeth, a young ferret easily can break a person's skin during these games. When the ferret bites or nips too hard, simply do what is natural and yelp in pain. It takes a while for them to realize that humans have only thin skin and no fur, which is no protection against bites. This rough play is an essential part of a ferret's life, especially when young. Once they recognize that they are hurting us, ferrets modify their play so as not to do damage. Nipping, that is pinching the skin hard without breaking it, is another invitation to play. Some kits never nip, but most do and, though they do mellow with age, this is a normal communication process with ferrets.

Care

Housing

Ferrets are active, curious animals that need lots of space to run and play with plenty of tubes and toys keep them occupied. A spacious bedroom area is needed, preferably on an upper level, with lots of warm snuggly quilts to hide in. This should be damp and draft proof, accessible by ladder with a sheltered area below to protect food and water from wind or rain. A large run, minimum 4ft x 6ft should be attached, so that your pets always have adequate access to a play area. Ferrets are notorious escape artists and can squeeze through the tiniest of gaps so it is vital that you ensure the pen is escape proof. Ferrets will not survive in the wild so you must assume full responsibility for them.

If your ferret is to live in the home with you then their cage must be multi level and very spacious and they should have regular access to an outside of cage play area.

Ferrets love to tunnel, so their favourite beddings are sheets, towels, blankets, sweaters and such. These items are ideal for ferrets to snuggle into, but ensure that sweaters and blankets do not have decorations on them that the ferret can pull off and swallow. The child in the ferret enjoys the things he can crawl into, under, and through, like drainage pipe and box lids. Small cardboard boxes, bags of plastic and paper, throw rugs and towels, white socks and clean linen: These are some of a ferret's favorite things.

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Food

Ferrets are exceptionally playful, so expect your ferret to tip over his food and water bowls. Check on them often, and use a heavy dish or place a rubber mat underneath for spillage.

Because ferrets have such rapid metabolisms, they wake to eat about every four hours. Fresh water and food should always be available to them. Ferrets eat only what they need and leave excess food for later, so one need not worry about over feeding.

Ferrets must be fed a high quality dry ferret or kitten food such as James Wellbeloved ferret complete. Hard food keeps the ferrets teeth clean and makes their faeces less smelly. The food should contain from 32% to 36% protein (half of which should be derived from meat), at least 18% fat, minimal ash and the supplement taurine to prevent urinary tract problems. There is no need to change diet for older ferrets.

Vitamin supplements are not necessary if the ferrets are fed high quality food and fresh fruit. However, many ferrets love Linatone or Ferritone vitamin supplements, which are given as reward for good behavior or a distraction when clipping nails and such. No more than 3 drops per day should be given to your ferret as an excess of certain vitamins can cause medical problems including fur loss and blindness. Ferrets can also be fed fresh fruit such as banana and grapes or even hard boiled eggs for extra protein.

Health

Ferrets require yearly inoculations against canine distemper to which they are highly susceptible and it is always fatal. Given the frequency of distemper outbreaks, do not forget to inoculate against this every year! Include a dental examination for your pet when obtaining vaccinations also. Though ferrets seldom develop cavities, check your ferret's teeth regularly as many ferrets break their fangs when playing. This can cause excruciating pain and make the animal cranky and bitey. Supplementing your ferret's diet with a food formulated to clean teeth and massage gums (e.g. Hill's Prescription Diet Feline T/D) will reduce the likelihood of dental problems. Such foods are available only through veterinarians.

Spaying & Neutering

All ferrets should be neutered before they reach sexual maturity as this will drastically reduce their odour and it will extend their lives. Female ferrets go into heat in their first spring (generally in February) and they will remain in season until successfully mated. If mating does not occur, the females can succumb to aplastic anemia and die a most unpleasant death. You will greatly increase your female ferret's life span if you have her spayed before she goes into season.

Ferrets attract mates through the use of pheromones, giving the unaltered animals a very pungent aroma which most people find unpleasant. Unfixed males have a strong musky odour and will mark their territory with urine.

Be a responsible pet owner and have your pets neutered or spayed. This increases your pleasure in your pets and makes them more attractive to others.

Odor

One of the most common statements about ferrets is that they have a bad smell. Most of a ferret's odour results from the influence of sex hormones on normal skin secretions. These secretions are drastically reduced when the ferret is altered.

Being distantly related to skunks, ferrets also have anal scent glands that they can release at will, though they rarely spray unless they are fighting, mating or frightened. If your ferret is altered and descented and still has a strong odour, the cause is usually the food. Change your ferrets diet - remember, if the food smells bad, so will the animal.

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Intestinal Obstructions

A common cause of premature death in ferrets is the intestinal obstruction. Many ferrets will chew on soft rubber and other small objects if allowed to run loose in the house. Objects can become lodged in the ferret's intestine, causing an agonizing and slow death unless surgery is performed immediately to remove the obstruction. Many other items can be just as deadly: Doll feet or hands, erasers, ear plugs, sponges, coffee beans, small buttons, shoe inserts and other foam rubber items, etc. Be careful and use your common sense as you would if you had a toddler at home. Fortunately, most ferrets outgrow this rubber fetish once they have left kithood, but it is best to take no chances.

Do not feed your ferret grain-based foods (breads, cakes, cookies, cereals, noodles, etc.), nuts, or fibrous fruits and vegetables. These items are indigestible to ferrets and can result in various digestive problems, including blockages.

Warning signs of a blockage are listlessness, problems passing a stool, passing a thin and/or mucousy stool, refusal to eat or drink, and vomiting after eating or especially drinking. If you suspect a blockage, take your pet to your veterinarian immediately!

Illnesses

Ferrets can catch the human influenza and cold viruses and they can pass them back. If you have a cold or the flu, be sure to wash your hands before touching your ferret. Keep the ferret away from your face and do your best not to give your cold to your ferret.

Ferrets are also susceptible to canine distemper and rabies (see above). Other common diseases are adrenal and pancreatic tumors, cardiomyopathy, Aleutian disease, bronchial pneumonia and other viral infections. Most can be effectively treated given early diagnosis.

As ferrets tend to deteriorate quickly if they become ill due to their high metabolic rate, it is important to provide proper veterinary care immediately.

Ferrets are dry, temperate climate creatures who suffer from warm temperatures and the damp. Ferrets do not enjoy excesses of temperature, they do have sweat glands, but their thick fur prevents body cooling by evaporation, making them very susceptible to heatstroke and dehydration. Even if temperatures do not reach such an extreme, the ferrets are often left damp from sweat and sensitive to chills from sudden cooling afterwards.