About Ferrets

Basic Information

Origin

The ferret has been domesticated since approximately 400 BC. They are members of the order Carnivora and the family Mustalidae, which also includes minks, weasels, otters, skunks and badgers. The domestic ferret descended from the European polecat and was originally used for pest control, hunting rabbits and rodents, and has been raised for fur. (i.e. Ferrets are not rodents!)

Markings

The most common color variation is the sable or “fitch” variety, with a dark brown to black mask
and lighter undercoat. Other common varieties include cream, cinnamon, Siamese, chocolate, silver, albino, and panda, among others.

Life Span

The average life span for a pet ferret in the U.S. is 5-7 years, though a small number of ferrets may live as long as 12 years.

Sexual Maturity

Average age is 4-6 months. Most animals purchased as pets in the U.S. are neutered and descented at 4-6 weeks of age, prior to sale. All female ferrets not intended for breeding must be spayed before the first heat cycle. If a female ferret goes into heat and is not bred, she is at high risk of experiencing a greatly prolonged heat cycle that will cause serious illness and potentially is fatal. Neutering of male ferrets not intended for breeding is also strongly recommended.

Descenting

Most American pet ferrets are descented at the time of neutering, usually at 4-6 weeks of age. This means that the ferret is unable to spray during times of stress or aggression. However, it will not eliminate the normal musky odor that is spread from the oil glands in the skin (see Bathing).

State and Local Regulations

Ferrets are illegal to own as pets in California, Hawaii, and other select areas across the United States. In addition, most states do not recognize ferrets as domestic animals, and regulations regarding bites to humans and other animals may vary.

Behavior

Activity Level

Ferrets are lively, comical animals, and it is this quality that endears them to people as pets. Although ferrets sleep a good portion of the day (15-20 hours), they need exercise and should be allowed out in a supervised area for a minimum of 1-2 hours per day.

Multiple Ferrets
Ferrets can be kept singly, in pairs, or in groups of 3 or more. Ferrets play aggressively with each other and may bite fiercely along the back of each other's necks. This seldom results in serious injury, and eventually they work out a hierarchy within the group. New ferrets should be introduced slowly and in a neutral territory. Separate cages should be used until they have been well introduced under close supervision.

Other Pets

Ferrets typically enjoy interacting with other pets in the household. Close supervision is recommended during periods of interaction to prevent injury to the ferret by larger pets such as dogs and cats, and to prevent the ferret from harming smaller species such as birds and rodents, which may be perceived as prey.

Children

Ferrets are generally non-aggressive pets. However, nipping and biting can occur. There have been very few reported incidences of ferrets attacking small children, however close supervision at all times is warranted to prevent any unfortunate incidents. Licking and “ferret kisses” should be discouraged.

Vocalizations

Ferrets are generally very quiet animals. They may “chuckle” or “giggle” during play, and occasionally scream during rough play or fighting.

Tricks

Ferrets are highly intelligent and can be taught to do a number of tricks using food rewards and praise. As with any other animal, consistency and repetition are the keys to success!

Housing

Cage

Minimum size for 1 or 2 ferrets is 30"(L) x 30"(W) x 18"(H). Ferrets that spend most of the day in a cage benefit from a larger condo-style cage. The cage must be well ventilated, easy to clean and scrub, and escape-proof. Many sizes and styles are available commercially, but extra large dog kennels can also be modified to provide suitable housing. Aquariums are unsuitable housing for ferrets.
Ferrets

Temperature

Ferrets do not tolerate extremes in temperature and are highly prone to heat stress. For this reason, outdoor housing is not recommended in most areas of the U.S.

Litter

Most ferrets are easily litter trained. A pelleted organic litter (pine, recycled newspaper, etc) should be used instead of clay kitty litter. Several litter boxes should be provided in addition to the one in the cage - at least one per room in areas that the ferret plays. Litter boxes need to be cleaned daily. Most ferrets do not like to use the corner model litter boxes commonly sold for ferrets. Use cat sized litter pans instead.

Bedding

Wood shavings should not be used as bedding for ferrets. Shavings contain dust and oils that are irritating to the respiratory tract. Most ferrets prefer to burrow in cloth items such as old towels, blankets and sweaters. Baskets, boxes, hammocks and various other items can be provided as a “nest” for sleeping. Immediately remove any items that appear frayed or might be ingested.

Toys

Ferrets are natural burrowers, so any item that simulates this activity is typically enjoyable. Tunnels can be made out of PVC pipe, clothes drier hose, old pants legs and cardboard mailing tubes. Ferrets may eat rubber or plastic, so only very durable toys should be provided and inspected regularly for damage. Paper bags, cloth toys for cats or babies, and cardboard boxes with holes in the sides and top are all good choices.

Ferret-proofing

The average household is full of life-threatening dangers for a ferret. The first step is to get down low and take a good ferret-level look at any area where your ferret will be allowed to play. Any holes around plumbing or appliances must be well sealed. Wire mesh or plywood should be secured to the bottom of sofas, chairs and mattresses to avoid shredding, burrowing and possible entrapment. Ferrets love to climb into the base of open recliners and can be inadvertently crushed. Electrical cords must be out of reach or well covered to avoid chewing and potential electrocution. Cabinet doors need to have child-proof locks. All household cleaners and medications should be out of reach in a locked cabinet. Ferrets are fond of eating latex and foam rubber, leading to intestinal tract obstruction. Any objects made of soft latex or
foam rubber are strictly forbidden and should not be accessible. These items include shoes, earphones, rubber bands, stereo speakers and pipe insulation. Hard plastic carpet protectors in corners where your ferret likes to dig will help protect your carpet from being destroyed and help keep your ferret safe. Household plants will be readily uprooted by a digging ferret and may also be poisonous. Keep all plants out of reach.

Diet

Ferrets are strict carnivores. This means that in the wild, the only plant material they would eat is what is present in the gastrointestinal tract of their prey. Pet ferrets should ideally be fed a commercial diet formulated specifically for ferrets containing no less than 35-40% crude protein and 15-20% fat. The first 3 ingredients listed should be meat-based. Some high quality kitten and cat foods meet these requirements and can be substituted if no ferret formula is readily available. Mixing two or three different types of foods ensures that you will always be able to find something your ferret is used to eating. Any changes in diet should be made gradually over a 2-week period to avoid gastrointestinal upset, and it is generally best to find one good brand and stick with it. Although ferrets often seek out sweet or high-carbohydrate foods, these are not healthy and should be avoided. Fresh fruits and vegetables should be given rarely and only in small amounts, as larger amounts will reduce the intake of the appropriate diet and lead to malnutrition. Hard boiled or scrambled egg and chicken breast are more appropriate treats.

Preventative Care

Physical Exam

Ferrets should be examined when they are first introduced into the household to screen for any abnormalities or illness and to determine what preventive care is needed. Annual exams (usually at the time of vaccination) are recommended through 3 years of age, after which ferrets should be examined every 6 months.

Vaccinations

1) Distemper: Given at 8, 12, and 16 weeks, then annually.

2) Rabies: Given at 12-16 weeks, then annually. (Note: Vaccine reactions in ferrets are fairly common. Vaccines should be given one at a time (one per visit and at least 2 weeks apart), and the ferret monitored for 30-60 minutes post- vaccination for any adverse reactions.)

Intestinal Parasites
A fecal sample should be checked for intestinal parasites at the initial exam, and thereafter on an as needed basis determined by potential exposure and clinical signs.

**Heartworm Preventative**

Heartworm disease in ferrets resembles that in dogs. However, due to the ferret’s small size, just one adult worm in the heart can be lethal. Although not specifically labeled for use in ferrets, the smallest dose of Heartgard® (68 mcg) or kitten sized Revolution® given monthly are effective preventatives.

**Flea Control**

Both Advantage® and Frontline® have been used at half the cat dose to treat and prevent flea infestation. Neither of these products is labeled for use in ferrets, and all owners must be aware that this is an extra-label use. However, they appear to be relatively safe and effective. Traditional shampoos, sprays and powders that are safe for cats are also generally safe for ferrets.

**Dental Care**

Daily brushing with a cat or dog toothpaste is recommended. Routine scaling and polishing is performed yearly or on an as needed basis.

**Grooming**

Ferrets should be bathed no more than once every two weeks. They have a natural, normal musky odor from the sebaceous glands in the skin. Bathing may actually intensify this smell as these glands kick into overdrive in an attempt to replenish the oils that have been washed away! Regular brushing with a soft bristle brush will help keep the coat clean, and regular washing of bedding helps to reduce the odor. Nails should be trimmed monthly with human or pet nail trimmers. The ears should be clean and free of wax and debris. Ear cleaners sold for cats can be used safely on ferrets. Weekly ear cleaning helps keep odor to a minimum.

**Labwork**

Starting at 3 years of age, routine screening is recommended every 6-12 months. This is due to the unfortunately high incidence of serious disease, especially certain tumors, in older ferrets.

**Getting Ready**
Shopping List

Cage

Larger is always better! Two to three levels will allow plenty of areas for food, bedding and litter pans. The base or “footprint” of the cage should be no less than 4.5 sq ft.

Litter Pans

You will need at least 2 medium cat sized litter pans. Do not waste your money on small “corner” pans, unless you are using them in addition to the larger rectangular ones.

Litter Scoop

You will need this to scoop the poop in between full litter pan changes.

Litter

Yesterday’s News cat litter is best. No pine products or clumping cat litter!

Bedding

A variety of hammocks, tubes and sleep sacks are available. You will want at least one hammock per ferret, and either clean towels, soft blankets or old t-shirts (make sure towels are free of loose fibers and strings) for your ferret(s) to cuddle up in.

Food

Totally Ferret is one of the best ferret foods available. You can mix it with one or two other high quality ferret or kitten foods so that you will always have a brand your ferret is used to in an emergency. Good quality food must be available to your ferret at all times.

Food Dish

Heavy ceramic bowls or the type that attaches to the cage (Quick Lock) help prevent spills. You may want to buy two, so you can swap out when one gets dirty.

Water Dish
Same as above. Some ferrets prefer to drink from a dish, instead of a bottle, so it is nice to have both available for your fuzzies.

**Water Bottle**

Make sure to get a large enough size, like those marketed for rabbits and guinea pigs.

**Nail Trimmers**

The cat trimmers that look like a stubby pair of scissors work best for ferrets. Go ahead and get a good quality pair—you're going to need them on a regular basis (ferret nails grow rapidly and should be trimmed weekly).

**Shampoo and Ear Cleaner**

Look for products labeled safe for ferrets.

**Carrier**

The hard plastic Pet Taxi type carriers sold for cats work well for ferrets and will keep your ferret safe during car trips or other travel.

**Additional Items**

**Toys**

Small stuffed animals, puppy Nylabones, boxes, baskets, tubes, tunnels, cat toys and a wide variety of other items will be appreciated by your ferret. Avoid anything with foam or rubber parts, and always monitor your ferret closely during playtime to make sure he isn't ingesting anything he shouldn't. Intestinal blockage is a fairly common condition in young ferrets that requires surgery and is potentially deadly!

**Digging Box**

Can be made from a large Rubbermaid storage container with a hole cut in one side (near the top to avoid spilling). Fill with clean play sand, dried beans, or ping pong balls. Your ferrets will love it!
Treats

Several commercial treats are available, but are largely not recommended, because they often contain a lot of sugar. Hard boiled egg, small bits of baked chicken breast or fish, and freeze dried Salmon are all much healthier choices.

Sleeping Box

Can be made from a large Rubbermaid container with a hole cut in the side and attached to the cage with a short length of landscape drainage tubing. Fill the container with towels and fleece blankets to create an inviting bed. This gives your ferrets a dark, private bedroom to snuggle up in.

Leash and Harness

If you plan to take your ferret outside to play, you will need these to keep them safe. Take your time and train your ferret to wear the harness before you actually need to use it. Also beware that some ferrets are masters of escape and can wiggle out of even a well-fitted harness. So test their abilities indoors first!

Not Recommended

Sweet Treats

Ferrets are strict carnivores—sugar is not good for them!

Vitamins

Unnecessary if feeding an appropriate diet. Only use a supplement if recommended by your veterinarian.

Exercise Wheel or Balls

These devices are not appropriate or necessary for ferrets.

Ferret Proofing

Be sure you have thoroughly ferret-proofed your home before bringing your new baby home!
Adrenal Disease

General Information

Definition

A disease resulting from excess secretion of sex hormones from one or both adrenal glands. This disease is not the same as Cushing's disease in dogs, and serum cortisol levels are rarely elevated.

Pathology

Adrenal gland enlargement may be a result of hyperplasia (benign proliferation of normal cells), adenoma (benign tumor), or adenocarcinoma (malignant tumor). Malignant tumors may metastasize (spread to other organs), but only rarely.

Underlying Causes

The cause of adrenal gland disease in ferrets is not completely understood. The disease occurs is seen much more frequently in the United States than in other countries (especially Great Britain) where ferrets are bred and raised. The most widely proposed cause is that early neutering plays a role. Most ferrets in the U.S. are spayed and neutered prior to 6 weeks of age. The adrenal glands and gonads (ovaries and testes) develop embryonically from a common cell line. It is thought that when neutering occurs early in life (pre-pubertal), that cells in the adrenal gland are stimulated to produce the sex hormones normally produced by the gonads. Other contributing factors may include genetic inbreeding, feeding of commercially prepared foods versus whole prey, and indoor housing (lack of exposure to normal photoperiods).

Age

Common disease in older ferrets (3.5 years is average age at presentation).

Gender
Both males and females susceptible, but females may present more frequently due to vulvar enlargement.

**Clinical Signs**

Hair loss (alopecia) is a common finding (>90%), and may vary in severity. Hair loss is symmetrical and starts over the tail and rump, spreading laterally, dorsally and ventrally. Occasionally hair loss will be seasonal in the fall with regrowth in the spring in the early stages of disease. Pruritis, or itching, is also a common finding (>33%), especially over the shoulder blades. Skin may be thin, red and irritated with secondary infections. Vulvar enlargement occurs in over 70% of female ferrets with adrenal disease and is often the presenting complaint on exam. Prostate enlargement (hyperplasia and cystic changes) often occurs in males, and may result in urinary tract infection and outflow obstruction.

**Diagnosis**

**Physical Exam**

Enlarged adrenal glands are sometimes palpable on physical exam. The right adrenal gland is more difficult to palpate due to a closer attachment to the dorsal body wall and caudal vena cava. Other abnormal findings may include an enlarged spleen and intra-abdominal lymph nodes.

**CBC and Chemistry Panel**

Both the CBC and chemistry panel are often within normal limits. If disease is severe or chronic, estrogen-induced bone marrow toxicity may result in anemia and reduced white blood cell production.

**Radiographs**

Generally not helpful in visualizing the adrenal gland mass, as they rarely mineralize. However, radiographs are a useful tool for diagnosing concurrent illness such as heart disease.

**Ultrasound**
Abdominal ultrasound is useful for identifying enlarged adrenal glands and determining size and which side is involved. Also aids in identifying concurrent disease.

**Plasma Sex Hormone Measurement**

Levels of one or more sex hormones are typically elevated with adrenal disease. These hormones include: dehydroepiandrosterone sulfate, androstenedione, 17-hydroxyprogesterone and estradiol.

**Note**

Tests commonly used to diagnose Cushing’s disease in dogs (ACTH stimulation and LDDST) are not diagnostic for ferret adrenal disease.

**Exploratory Laparotomy**

Direct visualization of the adrenal glands. Also useful for detection of other forms of cancer commonly found in the pancreas (insulinoma) and lymph nodes (lymphosarcoma).

**Treatment**

**Surgical**

Removal of the affected adrenal gland(s) (adrenalectomy) is the preferred method of treatment and typically yields the best clinical results. Potential complications post-surgery include recurrence of the adrenal tumor due to metastasis (rare) or the appearance of disease in the remaining adrenal gland. Prostatic cysts and abscesses may also require surgical treatment at the time of adrenalectomy.

**Medical**

Several drugs have been tried for medical treatment of ferret adrenal gland disease, most with limited success. Mitotane, or o,p’-DDD, a drug used for treatment of Cushing’s disease in dogs, is rarely effective in ferrets and has many potential side effects. A more promising treatment regime using the drug Lupron (leuprolide acetate) has recently developed, but little is understood about how this drug works. Treatment with Lupron consists of a series of injections initially given 1 month apart. Several injections may be required prior to clinical improvement.
and maintenance injections are needed log-term. Lupron injections are a good alternative for animals that are unable to withstand surgery, but are not generally as effective and are very costly (~$200 per injection). Lupron does not reduce tumor size or prevent further growth, but seems to alleviate the effects of excess sex hormones produced.

Prognosis

Prognosis with surgical treatment is good if concurrent disease is not present and metastasis has not occurred. The prognosis with medical treatment is unpredictable. Prognosis worsens if bone marrow suppression, urinary tract obstruction, tumor-related obstruction of major blood vessels or metastasis occurs.