



Living with Companion Ferrets



Ferrets As Pets

Ferrets are mischievous, clever and highly interactive animals that make wonderful pets. They are small and quiet, and well suited for apartment life. Their social nature requires daily interactive play-time with their humans, and many ferret owners keep more than one so the ferrets can have company while the owner is at work. Ferrets are full of spirit and personality, but their charm also gets them into trouble. Patience and a sense of humour are important characteristics of a ferret owner.

They will often playfully chase and tackle a person's ankles when walking across the room, which requires a watchful eye and a careful step when ferrets are out playing. Extreme care should be exercised when young children are playing with ferrets, as ferrets may be dropped, stepped on or sat on. Many ferrets are caged when

they can't be monitored for their safety, but they need 4-6 hours out of their cage to play and explore every day. Other ferrets are housed in ferret proof areas. Ferrets can be compared to kittens that never grow up. Ferrets are very playful, but have different tastes. Balls, squeaky toys, stuffed animals, shredded paper, dryer tubes are all common play items. Monitor toys for wear and tear and do not give toys with small pieces that can be chewed off and swallowed.

Description

Ferrets are long-bodied, short-legged members of the weasel family. They can be found in a variety of coat colours, the most common being sable. Sable ferrets have dark brown guard hairs over a light tan undercoat with black legs and tails and a black raccoon-like mask over their white faces. Other coat colours include albino, dark-eyed white, cinnamon, blaze, panda and silvermitt. Most ferrets have short coats, but there is a new longhaired breed coming into popularity called angora.

They undergo a complete coat change twice a year, coinciding with an often dramatic seasonal weight gain and loss. They

normally require no brushing, but may be bathed with a pet or tearless shampoo occasionally. Ferrets are usually sold neutered and descented, but retain a slight musk smell. Bathing and washing the ferrets' bedding blankets and towels minimizes this scent. Bathing a ferret too frequently can actually increase the odour because their skin gets too dry and their bodies begin to produce more oils to compensate.

The wild relatives of ferrets include the European polecat, mink, otter and the endangered black-footed ferret. Ferrets are domestic animals, and should not be expected to survive in the wild. They have little fear and may be killed by dogs or wild predators, or will starve if abandoned outside.

Ferrets should be neutered at an early age to avoid health problems encountered by females that enter prolonged heats and to avoid the inter-ferret aggression and odour associated with intact males. They should be seen by a veterinarian annually for a check up and for rabies and canine distemper vaccines. Seek out ferret-experienced veterinarians when possible, as they will be most familiar with common ailments and



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vaccination protocols for ferrets.

People who own ferrets take pleasure in watching their joyful antics. Few pets demonstrate such jubilation as ferrets. They will leap in the air, dance and dart around like ping pong balls. They wrestle with each other, and with their owners. A dryer hose is a popular toy with ferrets and they love to be chased through it (be sure to place duct tape over the sharp piece of wire on each end of the hose before letting a ferret play with it).

As they get older, some ferrets become lap pets, enjoying a quiet nap in front of the TV, but many retain their youthful impatience, wanting to run, play and explore without time for quiet petting. They all have distinct personalities and getting to know them is part of the enjoyment of ferret ownership

Ferret-Proofing

The easiest way to keep a ferret safe is to keep him in a cage or ferret proof area when not supervised, and to have a ferret safe room where he can play for a few hours every day. Ferrets love to dig and rummage through everything, so keep in mind that sofa cushions, laundry baskets (more than one ferret has made it into the washing machine or dryer) or the mat by the door might be

hiding a ferret underneath. If you are unsure where your ferret could be, check before sitting down. A ferret play room should have no holes or access into the heating vents. Child locks can be used on cupboards to keep ferrets from finding your cleaning chemicals. To avoid frustration, potted plants should not be accessible to your ferret, as ferrets love nothing more than digging to the bottom of a pot. Many ferrets like to chew rubber, so sneakers, erasers, and other rubber objects should never be accessible in a ferret-proofed room.

Rocking chairs, hide-a-beds, recliners, dishwashers, refrigerators and a slammed door are potential dangers to a ferret. They are so curious, they have been known to climb inside an opened fridge or dishwasher, and the consequences can be fatal.

Ferrets can climb, so pay attention to potential "ferret ladders" that can provide access to shelves or tabletops you would prefer them not to play on. They can also climb to the top of a patio screen door, and a fall from that height may be hazardous.

If there is no door to the room you have ferret-proofed, a gate can be made or bought to keep a ferret contained. Ferrets can easily climb a child-gate, but



attaching plexi-glass to one side of the gate or screwing plexi-glass in the door jam will prevent them from getting over.

Training and Handling

Ferrets can easily be trained to come to a whistle or to a squeaky toy by rewarding the ferret with a popular treat like a few drops of Ferretone™ (a liquid vitamin supplement) Some people have been able to teach their ferrets to perform tricks like rolling-over or begging for rewards.

Like puppies and kittens, young ferrets tend to use their mouths to explore their world, and nipping should be discouraged. It is not advisable for a person to yank a hand back and squeal if a ferret nips, as this is quite exciting for the ferret. It is best to grasp the ferret by the scruff and quietly withdraw your hand. When scruffed, a ferret normally goes limp. Hold the scruff for a few moments and say "No!" firmly. If the ferret does not respond appropriately, put him in a pet carrier, other than his cage, for a 2-3 minute time out. Ferrets usually grow out of the nippy stage by six months of age, if properly trained.

Ferrets can be litter trained, but are rarely as committed to them as a cat. To improve their bathroom habits, a ferret should

have a rectangular litterbox in his cage, and at least two, placed diagonally in his play room. When a ferret needs to relieve himself he will not be willing to go very far to find an appropriate spot. To prevent a ferret from using a corner that does not have a litterbox, lay an old towel in the corner, or scatter some of the ferret's food on the floor. You can also put the litterbox in the corner that the ferret picks. Only pine pellet, corn cob litter or recycled newspaper pellets should be used for litter.

Ferrets can be trained to accept a harness and leash and some enjoy trips outside. Be aware that strange dogs, cats and birds of prey might pose a threat to your ferret, so be watchful whenever your ferret is outdoors.

Cages

Ferrets sleep for up to 16 hours a day, so as long as the ferret is provided with ample time to play out of its cage every day, a single ferret can live comfortably in a 6 square foot cage, of course a larger cage is always preferable. A cage should contain a litterbox, a few towels for bedding, toys, a water bottle and a food bowl, either attached to the bars of the cage, or heavy enough not to be flipped over by the ferret. Most ferrets love to sleep in a

hammock, and these increase the floor space in a ferret's cage by lifting the sleeping area off the floor. Ferrets like to vary where they sleep so more than one area should be provided. When selecting a cage for your ferret, remember that a ferret is an animal that requires horizontal surfaces. There are ferret cages sold that are modified cat cages, of a vertical design with narrow shelving and ladders. Although many ferret owners use these without trouble, as a ferret ages, it may be less able to climb to higher levels.

Diet

Ferrets are strict carnivores. Their diet should contain at least 32% meat protein, 18% fat and minimal carbohydrate. Many ferret owners feed a high quality kitten kibble, or a ferret formulated kibble. Be sure to check that the first three ingredients listed on the package are meat. Totally Ferret is a highly recommended food.

You can supplement a ferret's diet with chicken baby food, cooked egg and cooked meats. There is reason to believe that feeding ferrets a diet containing excessive carbohydrates contributes to one of the most





common diseases seen among pet ferrets, insulinoma. For this reason it is best to avoid treats like raisins, dry cereals and some packaged treats.

Health

Ferrets should have their nails trimmed regularly to prevent being caught on their bedding. This is most easily accomplished by placing a few drops of liquid vitamin supplement (like Ferretone™ or Linatone®) on the ferret's belly and putting the ferret in a sitting position on your lap. While the ferret licks off the vitamin supplement, you can clip all 20 nails and there will be no struggle. Check your ferret's teeth for tartar and gingivitis, and the ears for reddish-brown waxy debris. This wax is often a sign of ear mites. A ferret's ears may require periodic cleaning with a damp cotton ball. Never use a cotton tipped swab to clean your ferret's ears. He may struggle, and you could injure his ear.

One of the most common health issues among ferrets is known as ECE, or Epizootic Catarrhal Enteritis. This is a viral diarrhea spread easily between ferrets. A ferret can continue to shed the virus for up to six months after recovering from the diarrhea, so be cautious when allowing your ferret to interact with other ferrets, or when bringing home

a second ferret. Always wash your hands after handling other ferrets. This virus causes profuse green watery diarrhea that can last up to two weeks, causing weight loss and severe dehydration.

Insulinoma is a fairly common disease seen among ferrets. This disease is caused by tumours of the pancreas, causing it to release too much insulin. The disease is the opposite of diabetes, and causes the ferret's blood sugar levels to drop. The ferret may have seizures, hind leg weakness, or stare off into space. A blood sugar test can be done to diagnose insulinoma, and a veterinarian can suggest treatments.



Adrenal gland tumours are also seen among pet ferrets, and this is often but not necessarily identified by hair loss on the tail, and continuing up the ferret's body. The tumours may also cause the ferret to revert to sexual behaviours and may cause them to be aggressive to other ferrets. Females may exhibit a swollen vulva and some ferrets become very itchy.

Because of their fondness for rubber, intestinal blockages are also a common problem with ferrets. If a ferret is vomiting, and has reduced or absent bowel movements, a blockage should be suspected. Prompt medical care is necessary as a ferret will quickly succumb to dehydration.

Aleutian Disease Virus (ADV) is a parvovirus that is becoming more prominent in pet ferrets. Symptoms vary among ferrets, but some ferrets can be asymptomatic carriers for months or even years. There is no vaccination available and no known cure.

Ferrets and Other Animals

Ferrets often become great friends with cats and dogs, but introductions should be carefully monitored. Terriers and other hunting breeds in particular should be given the most care upon introductions. If a dog or cat has a history of hunting, it is best not to introduce them to your ferret.

Like cats, ferrets are instinctively motivated by small fluttery movements, and should never be given access to birds, reptiles, rodents or rabbits.





Before you Make the Commitment...

- ✓ Ferrets will require medical care. Have you planned in your budget for emergencies?
 - ✓ If you rent, have you checked to be sure you will be allowed to keep a pet ferret?
 - ✓ What will you do with your ferret during vacation time?
 - ✓ Ferrets generally live to be 6 to 10 years old. Are you prepared for this long-term commitment?
 - ✓ Young children should not be left unsupervised with ferrets. Do you have the time to spend with the children and their pet? Will you teach them to handle the small animal gently and carefully?
- ✓ Do you have other pets to consider before taking a ferret home?
 - ✓ A ferret sheds. Are there allergies in your family?
 - ✓ Will a ferret fit into your home and lifestyle?

Checklist

Housing

- Roomy cage
- Rectangular Litter box (inside and outside cage)
- Food bowl (heavy)
- Water bottle or bowl (heavy)
- Toys (inside and outside cage)
- Pet carrier
- Ferret-proofed play/exercise area

Food

- High quality ferret food

- Chicken baby food, and cooked meats
- Ferretone™ or Linatone® vitamin supplement (for treats and training)
- Ferret treats (for occasional use)
- Tonic Lax, Laxatone

Supplies

- Toenail clippers
- Litter (pine pellets or recycled newspaper pellets)
- Litter scooper
- Old towels for bedding
- Toys
- Good book on ferret care
Ferrets For Dummies

Vet Care and More

- Annual exam (including vaccinations)
- Emergency medical care
- Vacation care

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