

Common Ferret Ailments

The best advice is to consult your vet if you think your ferret may be ill.

Canine distemper: This disease is invariably fatal in ferrets and must be vaccinated against. Ask your vet for advice.

Heat exhaustion: Caused by the ferret's home being left in direct sunlight. Move to a cool shaded place and provide plenty of water.

Influenza: Ferrets are susceptible to the human 'flu virus, developing the same symptoms. Isolate the infected animal and consult a vet immediately.

Mange: Symptoms include bald patches of fur and broken skin caused by continual scratching. Consult a vet immediately.

Fleas: Use a flea product that is safe for cats, You will also need to treat your home and the ferret cage.

Hairballs: Ferrets are prone to developing hairballs which can be prevented by using a cat hairball laxative. This can avoid costly surgery.

Hair loss: Related to a variety of hormonal problems. Consult a vet for guidance.



Ferret Facts

Ferrets are social animals and should be kept as a pair at least; ferrets from the same litter usually get on well together. It is advisable to have ferrets neutered by the vet to prevent them breeding. A male ferret is called a 'hob', a female is a 'jill' and a young ferret is a 'kit'. It is generally best to start with a kit which can be trained more easily. They are found in a variety of colours including white, silver, cinnamon, chocolate and sable. Entire males can have a strong smell if kept indoors and tend to be more aggressive, so neutered males or females are preferable as pets.

Life Span:
6 to 12

Adult weight:
1 to 5.5 lbs -
varies with
time of year

Adult size:
17 to 24
inches

Heart rate:
220-250

Weaning age:
6 to 8
weeks

Environmental temperature:
15° to 20°C

The Environmental Animal Sanctuary & Education (EASE) is a registered charity (no. 1089160) which promotes aspects of the human/companion animal relationship. Our services include the provision of a Preparing for Pet Loss programme and education on animal welfare. For more information about our work, contact:

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Environmental Animal
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The EASE Guide to Caring for FERRETS



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Ferrets make wonderful pets although they can be quite demanding and will get bored if they don't receive enough attention. You should be aware that they can inflict quite serious bites and emit a strong smell. They can live for up to twelve years and can be expensive to feed. These facts as well as the cost of any veterinary attention they may need must be considered before taking on ferrets.

A Home for your Ferrets

Ferrets need a large home which should be raised up off the floor and shielded from direct sunlight. As a guide, the minimum size for two ferrets is 1.5 metres long by 0.5 metres high and 0.5 metres deep. Ferrets are excellent escape artists so any doors should be securely fastened, even locked.

Metal cages are suitable as the ferrets like to stick their noses through the wire to sniff at passing odours; they also allow good ventilation. Aquariums are not suitable as they do not allow the air to circulate freely.

The floor of the cage should have a solid base, such as a plastic tray covered with wood shavings, avoiding cedar or pine wood. There should be a separate and enclosed area provided for sleeping, which can simply be a cardboard or wooden box with an old, clean t-shirt or similar for bedding along with some fresh, soft meadow hay. Using an old shirt has the advantage of it being easily washed and reused. You can also provide some hammocks made from old clothing as somewhere for your ferrets to have a nap.

Ferrets love to burrow so their home can be furnished with cardboard tubes or lengths of drainpipe for them to explore. Also provide toys such as wooden cotton reels and golf balls to play with, making sure that the tubes and pipes are not so narrow that they become trapped. Never use rubber toys which can cause intestinal blockages if they are chewed and swallowed.

Place a litter tray filled with non-clumping, dust-free litter in the cage in the area that your ferrets tend to use as a toilet.



Food and Drink for your Ferrets

Ferrets are carnivorous animals and so their food should be primarily meat. They require a high protein diet - between 32% and 38% - which can be provided by using a top-quality dry cat food or specialist dry ferret food. For young ferrets, use a high-quality dry kitten food or specialist young ferret food from a pet shop. Dog foods are NOT suitable as they contain cereal and plant proteins in their formula, as do lower-quality cat foods, and these cannot be utilised by ferrets.

Ferrets have a high dietary fat requirement - between 20% and 30% - so it may be necessary to provide a fatty acid supplement, such as is available for cats, at the rate of 1/8 teaspoon per day which the ferret may happily take from the spoon. Extra fat can also be supplied by giving about one teaspoon per day of extra meat fat in their food.

Cooked meat and egg scraps are acceptable 'treat' foods for ferrets although be careful not to include anything containing bones. Pieces of fruit or vegetable can occasionally be given, although only sparingly as the fibre cannot be digested well and too much can lead to diarrhoea.

NEVER feed anything high in refined sugar as this is not natural to the ferrets diet and can cause diabetes.

Clean, fresh water must always be available, preferably in a drip-feed bottle as ferrets like to play in water and may overturn a bowl.



Handling your Ferrets

Ferrets should be handled regularly so that they become accustomed to people and to keep them tame. You should always be gentle but firm when handling ferrets. To pick them up, place one hand around the shoulders and the other hand around the hindquarters, keeping it close to your body.

Ferrets

Ferrets belong to the same family as badgers, weasels, stoats, otters and are descended from the European polecat. They have been domesticated and bred since around 400BC, and working ferrets have long been used in Europe to hunt rabbits. They are still popular in the UK where wild rabbits do a lot of damage to crops in gardens and allotments. They are increasingly kept simply as pets, as they are intelligent animals that bond strongly with their owners.



Ferret Body Language

Ferrets are individuals who will behave uniquely although there are behavioural traits common to all.

Wild dancing: A ferret will sometimes dance around, hopping, rolling, jumping and wagging its head as an expression of joy or anger. If it is angry, it will arch its back and hiss or screech with an open mouth.

Violent tail wagging: This is a sign of great excitement or is a playful challenge to another ferret or even a human.

Trembling: Upon waking a ferret will often tremble as a way of raising its body temperature. It can also be a sign of excitement or fright.

Biting: Ferrets can be nippy when playing and this is normal, especially with young ferrets. They should be gently but firmly taught that it is not acceptable behaviour