

General Care – Ferrets

Created by: Viki Calhoun, RVT

When bringing home a new pet, it is important to be well prepared. This is especially true when bringing home any kind of “exotic” pet, such as a ferret. Ferrets are incredibly active and curious little animals, and very prone to getting into mischief if their little minds and bodies aren’t kept stimulated: the best-behaved ferret is a busy ferret. They also have unique dietary and healthcare needs that must be addressed to support the longest, healthiest life possible.

DIET

Ferrets are true carnivores that are naturally designed to kill and eat whole prey items. They have a very ineffective digestive system that moves quickly and does not utilize carbohydrates or fiber well. Because of this, their diet needs to consist of high protein, high fat items.

- The protein used should be animal-based, as plant-based proteins lack certain needed amino acids and can lead to illness.
- Because of how quickly their GI tract moves, these animals are best suited for small, frequent meals through the day, opposed to the standard twice a day feeding model common in cats and dogs.

Types of diet options include raw or freeze-dried, canned, or kibble. Each option has its own pros and cons to consider.

- Raw / Freeze-dried:
 - **PRO** - Highest percentage of animal-based protein.
 - **PRO** - Good for dental health (it’s what their teeth are designed for)
 - **CON** - May carry bacteria and parasites that can be a risk to the ferret and human.
- Canned:
 - **PRO** - High protein and fat.
 - **PRO** - Provides additional hydration.
 - **CON** - Higher chance of dental disease.

***Best used as a supplement, not a complete diet**
- Kibble:
 - **PRO** - Most convenient and readily available.
 - **CON** - Requires carbs/starches to form the kibble.
 - **CON** - May predispose to GI issues, insulinomas, and bladder stones.
 - **PRO/CON** – May help keep teeth clean, but can also cause excessive wearing of the teeth.

*If choosing to use a dry kibble diet, look for a ferret specific one with animal proteins listed as the first 3 ingredients and at least 35% protein, 20% fat, and less than 5% fiber (ie Marshall). Avoid feeding cat food as is not formulated appropriately for ferrets.

For treats, there are a few commercially available options, but always make sure to check the ingredients and nutritional breakdown, as not all treats available are actually good for them. Look for the same composition as you would when choosing a kibble diet. Insects, small prey items, and eggs can also be offered.

General Care – Ferrets

*Please note that ferret dietary preferences develop at a very young age, and trying to change their diet after that point can be difficult and time consuming, **but not impossible**.

HABITAT

Ferrets are small animals with big personalities and an inquisitive nature just as large. They need a multilevel habitat that is spacious (as large as possible) and filled with hiding spots, tunnels, hammocks, and toys to keep them busy and entertained. It's also important to make sure the cage is ferret-proof – if there is any possible way to escape, they will find it.

The flooring of the cage should be solid to minimize the risk of feet or toenails becoming caught and injured, as can happen with mesh bottoms. Ferrets love to dig and burrow, so provide layers of soft bedding and blankets to support this natural behavior. Just be careful, some ferrets will chew and ingest fabrics and may need to be offered an alternative.

Ferrets can be easily litter box trained, especially if done when they're young. They typically prefer to use the bathroom in a corner of the enclosure and tend to go in the same spot. Corner shaped boxes with a high back are preferred, as well as a box (or multiple) available outside the cage during their free time.

- The time it takes for food to move through their GI tract is about 3 hours, so if you keep track of the time after they eat, you can help encourage them to get to the litter box in time to do their business, and when they do, be sure to reward them with a treat.
- Stick to a pelleted litter, preferably paper based.

ENRICHMENT

Ferrets typically sleep a total of about 16 hours per day, but when they're not sleeping, they are bursting with energy and ready to play.

For toys, focus on those that are mentally stimulating and provide a bit of challenge. Ferrets are quite smart and need toys that can keep them well engaged. Puzzle toys that can hide treats are wonderful, as are balls or other toys that roll and can be chased and "hunted". The most important thing to remember with toys is safety.

- Avoid toys made of foam or rubber which can be easily chewed and cause an obstruction in the GI tract if ingested.
- Use caution with fabric toys, some ferrets will readily rip them up, others do fine with them.

Ideally, ferrets should be allowed a few hours, supervised, outside of the cage each day. Keep in mind, while running around, they will find every hiding spot possible and will likely steal (and possibly eat) whatever small objects they can carry if not watched closely. Make sure to offer ferret-safe alternatives and ferret-proof the house before letting them out.

Not only can ferrets be litterbox trained, but they can also be trained to do tricks! Teaching your ferret new tricks provides healthy mental stimulation for them, as well as a great bonding opportunity for you and them.

General Care – Ferrets

GROOMING

Ferrets actually require very little in terms of grooming. They do not require regular bathing or brushing. The biggest concern is their nails, which can grow quite long and sharp, and can get snagged and cause injury. Regular nail trims can be done at home, or at your veterinarian's office.

As for the well-known ferret smell, most ferrets available from pet stores or breeders have been "de-scented", meaning that their anal glands have been surgically removed (usually at the time of spay or neuter). While this may reduce some odor, the musky smell is also produced through scent glands in the skin and cannot be completely eliminated. There are products on the market that claim to cover or remove the odor, but these can cause more harm than good and should be avoided. The best way to minimize any unpleasant odors is to make sure the enclosure is kept clean.

Veterinary Care

Proper vet care is vital for these animals. Just like cats and dogs, they should have annual exams and vaccines (rabies and distemper), done with an exotic animal veterinarian. Having a vet well-versed in exotic animal medicine is particularly important when it comes to vaccinating, as ferrets are prone to severe vaccine reactions. Ferrets should receive 1 vaccine at a time and should be premedicated with diphenhydramine [Benadryl] (**BY YOUR VET**) before receiving any vaccine, and then monitored closely afterward.

Ferrets are also susceptible to heartworm disease, so be sure to discuss preventative options with your veterinarian. The necessity of this may vary depending on where you live.

As they age, ferrets are prone to developing illnesses including adrenal disease, insulinomas, and lymphoma. Having regular check-ups and bloodwork can help detect these issues early, and while they cannot be cured, in many cases they can be medically managed.

- **When to call the vet:**

- Decreased appetite
- Sneezing / nasal discharge
- Bloody urine
- Wounds
- Lumps
- Limping, mobility changes
- Weight loss
- Excessive scratching / hair loss
- Diarrhea
- Minor vomiting

- **EMERGENCIES:**

- Difficulty breathing
- Dark, tarry stools
- Prolapse of any tissue
- Excessive vomiting
- Straining to urinate
- Trauma
- Not eating >12hrs
- Seizures
- Severe lethargy
- Unresponsive
- Ataxia (wobbliness)

***If you ever notice changes with your pet and are unsure if a vet visit is needed or whether it is an emergency, please call your vet – it's always better to be safe.**

General Care – Ferrets

Additional Resources

- [Chicago Exotics Animal Hospital](#)
- [Oxbow Animal Health](#)
- [Lafaber Vet](#)