

FERRETS AS PETS



Any ferret lover will tell you that ferrets make great pets. Ferrets are playful, joyful creatures and are endlessly entertaining. They not only steal your heart, but they take over your home and your life. A ferret will bond to you and love you fully. Ferrets who lose their homes or families can become very depressed and will literally die of a broken heart. So, if you decide to get a ferret as a pet, you must be prepared to make a lifetime commitment to that

animal. Also, there is a down side to ferret ownership. They are messy, difficult to potty train, and can be very expensive when they have health problems. They need a lot of exercise. You have to be prepared to let them run around your home for a few hours everyday. Finally, ferrets are illegal to own in the state of California. In spite of this, ferrets are popular pets in California. Veterinarians are allowed to treat them and some vets even specialize in treating ferrets. There are also several ferret lover clubs in California, which can be a great support system to ferret owners.

If you have a ferret as a pet, please remember ferrets cannot survive out in the wild. They can be killed by dogs, cats and other predators. Their hunting instincts have been bred out of them, so in the wild, they will starve. It is believed that ferrets have been domesticated for over 2500 years. So, if you decide you don't want your ferret anymore, do not release him/her into the wild. It will be a death sentence for that ferret. Please contact a ferret shelter or a ferret club to surrender your pet.

GENERAL FERRET DATA

Ferrets have a lifespan of 6-10 years. It varies as a result of heredity, health care, diet and exercise. Male ferrets generally weigh between 2.5 to 5 lbs. Females weigh between 1 to 3 lbs. A healthy ferret will have soft, silky fur, and long whiskers. Rough, dry, brittle or sparse hair indicates illness or poor nutrition. A normal ferret rectal temperature is 100-103 deg. F (or 37.8-39.4 deg C). Their normal heart rate is 216-250 bpm. Normal respirations are 33-36 per minute. Normal fasting glucose (at least 4 hours) is between 65-164.

Ferrets can reach full adult size by 6 months of age. A ferret's age is can be determined by looking at it's upper canines. A solid white tooth would indicate the ferret is a year or younger. A yellow completely translucent tooth would indicate a ferret of around six years or older. The ferret's appearance and coat condition can also help with determining it's age. Ferrets can be blind or deaf at any age. They compensate so well that it is often difficult to determine if they are blind or deaf. Don't worry, they are just as happy as other ferrets.

Ferrets are "obligate" carnivores. This means they can only digest meat. They require a high protein, high fat, low carbohydrate ferret or kitten kibble for proper nutrition. If your ferret is ill and/or not eating, you can make a liquid food that is more easily digested and can be fed by spoon or syringe. Ferret people call this "duck soup." Duck soup can be as simple as blending ground kibble with hot water to a smooth liquid consistency. Duck soup can be made with chicken or turkey baby food, Ensure, A/D mixed with water or even a whole, cooked, pureed chicken.

FERRET MEDICAL DATA

We are not veterinarians. We are just ferret people who want to pass on our experience with ferrets to help other ferret owners. If your ferret shows any of the signs or symptoms we

describe in this pamphlet, don't panic, it's probably treatable, but you must get the ferret to your vet. One of the first things a new ferret owner should do is take their ferret in for a checkup. Establishing a relationship with a good ferret vet is the most important thing you can do for your ferret and yourself.

Ferrets require two yearly vaccinations. The first is Fervac-D for canine distemper. Canine distemper is extremely contagious and 100% fatal to ferrets. A ferret kit should receive its last distemper vaccination at 14 weeks of age. It should receive a booster shot once a year thereafter. The second vaccination ferrets require is Imrab-3 for rabies. Ferrets are unlikely to come into contact with rabies. There has never been a case in the history of the United States of a ferret passing rabies onto a human. However, if your ferret is not vaccinated, and he bites or nips someone, he can and will be killed and tested. A vaccinated ferret will most likely just be quarantined for several days or weeks.

Ferrets can have reactions to vaccinations. These are rare, but can be life threatening. Stay at the vet's office for 20-30 minutes after a vaccination to be on the safe side. It is also a good idea to separate your ferret's canine distemper shot and your ferret's rabies shot by three weeks. If your ferret exhibits vomiting, diarrhea, lethargy or anything out of the ordinary, get the ferret back to the vet immediately. Very rarely, ferrets have had reactions a few days, up to 2 weeks after a vaccination. Also, if your ferret appears to be ill or under stress, please postpone the vaccinations until his/her condition improves.

COMMON FERRET ILLNESSES

Ferret health problems include, but are not limited to, Adrenal Disease, Cardiomyopathy, gastrointestinal problems, viruses and insulinoma. All these diseases are treatable if the ferret receives vet care as soon as symptoms appear. The most important thing is for you to know your ferret. Know your ferret's eating, sleeping, playing and pooping patterns. If you notice something out of the ordinary with your ferret, it can be an indicator of illness. Ferrets are very stoic and not likely to show if they are sick or in pain.

Adrenal Disease happens when a ferret develops a benign or malignant tumor on his/her adrenal gland(s). Symptoms include hair loss, especially around the shoulders and on the tail, a swollen vulva in females, trouble urinating in males (due to prostate enlargement) and a change in behavior. An adrenal ferret may act aggressively or sexually toward other ferrets or may start licking and grooming them frequently. Treatment consists of surgery to remove the tumor(s) completely or at least as much as possible. Lupron shots are an alternative for ferrets that are non-surgical candidates.



Cardiomyopathy and/or Congestive Heart Failure occurs when the heart muscle begins to weaken, and cannot pump normally. Symptoms can include a persistent cough, lack of energy, lack of appetite and difficulty breathing. Diagnosis can be made by x-ray. Treatment consists of the diuretic Lasix, which will help keep the fluid down. Stress can be fatal to a ferret with CMP, keep things as normal and steady as possible.

Any type of diarrhea should be reported to your vet. There are many gastrointestinal problems or viruses that can cause diarrhea. A ferret that is not eating and has diarrhea can go downhill fast, so get them to your vet immediately. If you or anyone in your family has a cold, please wash your hands before handling your ferret or try not to handle the ferret at all until the virus has passed. Yes, ferrets can catch your cold and it is harder on them, than it is on you.

If your ferret is having a seizure, it's possibly caused by insulinoma. Insulinoma is a tumor on the pancreas which excretes excess insulin and causes the ferret's blood sugar to drop to dangerously low levels. Symptoms of low blood sugar can include lethargy, lack of appetite, staring off into space, drooling, coma and seizures. If the ferret is having seizures or is comatose, immediately give them sugar in the form of Karo Syrup or one of those gel frostings. Rub the syrup or gel along their gum line. Don't try to make them swallow anything because they might aspirate it. Wrap them up in a towel or blanket to keep them warm and get them to your vet right away. They will probably come out of the seizures or coma before you even reach the vet. Insulinoma can be treated by surgery, diet and medications.

Giving medicines to a sick ferret can, at times, be quite a challenge. It is best to give liquid medicine with a 1cc syringe that has the needle removed. You can squirt the medicine into the ferret's mouth. Squirt it in the side of the mouth across the ferret's tongue, not straight down his/her throat, because the ferret could aspirate it into his/her lungs. When giving a pill form, try to hide it in food or treats or grind it up, add some Ferretone and give it by 1cc syringe as with liquid meds. If the ferret does not like the taste of the med, you may have to scruff it or wrap it in a towel to give the med.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FERRET CLUBS

Get in contact with your local ferret club. Your club can provide an important support system. They can help you with babysitting, finding your ferret if it's lost or help you take care of your ferret if it is sick. Clubs are a good source of information regarding good vets, ferret illnesses, legalization issues and general ferret care. Also, if you need to surrender your ferret, the club will find it a good home. If your ferret is seriously ill and you cannot afford the vet care, then please give the ferret to your local club. Don't ever release it into the wild.

LOCAL CLUBS

Golden State Ferret Society (Bay Area)
<http://www.goldenstateferretsociety.org>
(925) 813-0846



Capital City Ferret Club (Sacramento Area)
<http://www.homestead.com/weazelluv/>
(800) 590-7932

For a list of Ferret Friendly Vets in California, please go to:
<http://www.goldenstateferretsociety.org/vetlist.htm>

For information on the Internet about ferrets please go to:
<http://www.ferretcentral.org> or
<http://www.goldenstateferretsociety.org/links.htm>

