



# Milwood Animal Clinic

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## Essentials for Ferrets

### Nutrition

- Mazuri Ferret Diet or Totally Ferret food are recommended.
- Ferrets are carnivores! Their foods should contain 32-38% protein.
- Ferrets need to have a 15-20% fat content to their diets, as well.
- Provide water in either a water bottle or a heavy ceramic or weighted bowl (ferrets like to play in their water, tipping it over).
- Avoid foods high in refined sugars. (These can cause pancreas damage and diabetes!)



### Enclosure

- Avoid wire bottom cages which can cause sores on their feet. Have a resting board on the bottom if this is the type of cage you have.
- The size of the enclosure should be a minimum 24" X 24" X 18" for 1 ferret.
- Your ferret can be litter trained! Newspaper or pelleted paper litters (such as Kitty Soft) are recommended.
- Avoid aquariums (which don't provide enough ventilation)!
- A sleeping area is necessary for your ferret! Provide a towel, old stocking cap, cardboard box with a hole cut into the side, or a cloth specially made for ferrets as a cozy place to sleep!
- Ferrets should be allowed to play outside their enclosure in a supervised ferret-proof area for at least 2 hours per day. Exercise time can be divided into 2 or 3 different periods. Always provide close supervision if you take your ferret outdoors. Specially made harnesses with leashes are available at pet stores and specialty websites. The "Ferret Fun 5-in-1" harness is an excellent harness and leash combination (available at [www.premier.com](http://www.premier.com)).

### Overall Health

- Be sure to have your ferret vaccinated against Distemper and Rabies annually!
- *Michigan law requires ferrets to be vaccinated annually for canine distemper and rabies.*
- Keep nails clipped to an appropriate length.
- Regularly check eyes, nose, ears, teeth, and droppings for any abnormalities.
- Avoid toys that can be chewed to pieces and swallowed (this can lead to intestinal obstruction and death!), especially toys made from latex or foam rubber.
- Ferrets can catch colds and the flu from humans! If your ferret gets sick, contact your veterinarian.

# CARE OF FERRETS

## NUTRITION

### Food

Ferrets are carnivorous animals, meaning that they are strictly meat eaters. It has been shown that they can only utilize amino acids from meat proteins and cannot digest amino acids from plant proteins. Ferrets should be fed a food made specifically for ferrets. Examples of diets we recommended for ferrets are Totally Ferret by Performance Foods and Mazuri Ferret Diet. The food should be fed dry unless there is a medical reason to do otherwise. Food may be left out to be eaten free choice. Obesity is rarely a problem.



When checking the food labels, make sure that the protein level is between 32% and 38%. Protein content over 40% may be detrimental to the kidneys of an older ferret. Ferrets also have a high dietary fat requirement, somewhere between 15% and 20% of the diet. A diet with a fat content less than this can lead to a dry brittle coat and itchy skin.

Avoid new 'grain free' diets for ferrets, especially those with peas (peas are known to cause cysteine bladder stones in ferrets). Also avoid diets with raisin juice as well as cat food. It is recommended to avoid home made diets as well because it is too difficult to formulate properly and result in nutritional deficiencies.

### Water

Clean, fresh water should always be available and can be given in either a water bottle or a heavy ceramic or weighted bowl. Ferrets like to play in their water and overturn it, so keep that in mind when selecting a container. Supplements do not need to be added to the water.

### Vitamins

If your pet is on a good quality diet then additional vitamins are not necessary in the healthy pet. Your veterinarian will prescribe any that would be necessary in the case of disease.

### Treats

Cooked meat and egg scraps are suitable table foods to offer your pet as a treat. Do not feed anything containing bones. Many ferrets also adore a bit of fruit or vegetable, but these items should be fed sparingly, because ferrets cannot digest fiber very well. If too much fruit or vegetable matter is given, it could lead to diarrhea. The rule of thumb is no more than a total of one heaping teaspoon per day of any treat should be given. Some favorite fruit and vegetable treats are cucumber, green pepper, and melon.

**Never feed your ferret foods that are high in refined sugars!** Ferrets do not naturally get sugar in their diet and feeding foods high in sugar puts a tremendous strain on the pancreas. The result may be diabetes mellitus, which is extremely difficult to treat in the ferret and ultimately leads to an early death. So, do not feed candies, cakes, sugar coated cereals, ice cream, chocolate, sweet dairy products, etc.

## Fatty Acid Supplements

As already mentioned, ferrets have a high fat requirement and it may be necessary for some animals to receive an additional supplement to improve coat quality. We find this most essential during the winter months, when the air in our homes is very dry and detrimental to the ferret's skin and coat. We recommend using any fatty acid supplement as used in cats (such Ferrotone) and feeding 1/8 tsp. to 1/4 tsp. per ferret daily on the food. Many ferrets really love the taste and will take it right off the spoon! Ferrets may also get meat fat (such as from poultry or beef) in the amount of 1 teaspoon of fat per ferret per day.

## Hairball Laxative

The accumulation of hair in the stomach of the ferret is a very common occurrence (especially in animals over one year of age) and may result in a costly surgery to remove it. It is much easier to prevent hairballs with the use of a cat hairball laxative. This product generally comes as a sticky paste and ferrets love the taste of it! We recommend giving a ribbon one-half to one inch in length at least every third day. This medication acts only as a lubricant and does not cause diarrhea. If your pet has never tried this before it is sometimes necessary to smear a little on their lips to introduce them to the taste.

## ENVIRONMENT

### Cage

The basic cage needed is a wire ferret cage (minimum size 24" x 24" x 18") with a solid floor. Newspaper or pelleted bedding such as Yesterday's News may be used on the floor or in corner litter boxes. Aquariums are NOT suitable cages for ferrets because the ventilation is very poor. The creative owner may build all types of elaborate caging arrangements. A multi-level cage, such as those made by Ferret Nation is the preferred cage type. Martin Cages also makes a high quality cage at a low cost. **It is highly recommended that your pet be caged when you are not at home to prevent any tragic accidents.**



### Exercise

Ferrets should not be caged 24 hours a day. Like all animals they need exercise to develop strong bones and muscles as well as for healthy mental activity. Ferrets have the physiology of a predatory hunter and will play intensely for an hour or so and then sleep deeply for several hours. Although ferrets are nocturnal by nature, they will adjust their activity schedule to yours without much fuss.



### Sleeping Area

An enclosed sleeping area is NECESSARY or your pet will become extremely frustrated and continually dig at the corner of the cage. A sleeping area can be as simple as a towel or shirt, an old stocking cap, a cardboard or wooden box with a hole cut in the side, the sleeve of a sweatshirt, etc. Ferrets LOVE hammocks and they can add vertical space to the living area. Please note that if your ferret likes to chew and eat towels or cloth of any kind, use a box or deep pan of some type instead of towels to prevent an obstruction of the intestinal tract with

cloth. The cloth eating habit is usually a baby behavior and stops by the time the pet is a year of age. It can also occur when food is not available at all times.

### **Litter Box**

Ferrets can be litter box trained about 90% of the time. A small low-sided box should be placed in the preferred toilet area of the cage (i.e. let your pet pick the spot first, then place the box in that area). You can use kitty litter (avoid the perfumed types), or pelleted bedding (as described in the paragraph on caging) in the box. (The biggest problem with clay kitty litter is that some ferrets will lie in their litter boxes and this will dry out their coat making it brittle and necessary to change the box frequently to minimize odor. When your pet is loose in the house, it may be necessary to place several litter boxes or papers in various corners, because ferrets are not very good at returning to “home base” if they get the bathroom urge and they are far away!

### **Toys**

Safe toys to give your pet are nylon bones, ping-pong and golf balls, small cans, paper bags, and very hard plastic toys. Most cloth toys are also suitable, but check carefully for the first week to make sure your ferret is not chewing any pieces off of it.

### **Hazards**

NEVER GIVE YOUR PET ANY RUBBER TOYS. Ferrets like to chew and swallow rubber, which could result in an intestinal obstruction and death. Make sure to FERRET PROOF your home and remove access to any rubber items such as ear phones, stereo speakers, rubber soled shoes, pipe insulation, rubber bands, chair bottom protectors, etc. (While you are at it make sure to get down on your hands and knees and check for any escape holes that the ferret could get into, and plug them up!) Ferrets also like to burrow into furniture and mattresses in search of a snug sleeping area. In the process they may swallow some of the foam rubber stuffing and develop an intestinal obstruction. It is important to cover the bottom of the furniture with hardware cloth or a sheet of wood to prevent this activity. Recliner chairs are also safety hazards and many a pet has lost its life by being suffocated when the chair was reclined. It is best to remove this item altogether from the environment.



## **VACCINATIONS**

**Rabies** – Rabies is caused by a virus that can affect many species of animals including man. The virus is shed in the saliva and transmission is usually through a bite wound. It can also be spread through contact of infected saliva with a mucous membrane or any open wound. Since rabies is a human health issue, there are strict local and state regulations that govern the vaccination of most domestic pets for rabies. Michigan law requires rabies vaccination for ferrets. The first vaccine should be given at three months of age with an annual booster thereafter.

### **Distemper**

Canine Distemper is considered highly contagious and has a high mortality in ferrets. This is the same virus that domestic dogs are typically vaccinated against throughout their lives. Prior to the widespread use of vaccines, this was a very common and deadly disease of pet dogs. Pet ferrets are highly susceptible and few infected animals survive the disease. Routine vaccination of ferrets against Canine Distemper is protective against infection.

## MEDICAL PROBLEMS

### Emergencies

It can be difficult for the veterinary staff to know that a situation is an emergency if you are unclear on basic information or if you don't specifically say that you think it is an emergency. Be clear and concise with pertinent information, which includes:

- The condition of the ferret at this moment (be as precise as possible)
- How long the condition has been present
- Ideas you have on why you think your pet is ill
- It is helpful to jot down some notes about your pet **before** calling the veterinary office so you don't forget important information.



### Fleas

Ferrets get fleas just like other mammals. If your pet has them, please use a flea product such as Revolution or Frontline. These products can also be used preventatively to keep your ferret from developing a flea problem in the first place. *Do not use flea collars on ferrets.* Remember to also treat the house and yard, the adult fleas on your pets generally make up less than 10% of the entire flea population in your home.

### Heartworm

Ferrets are susceptible to heartworm disease. This is a microscopic parasite that lives in the salivary glands of the mosquito and is transmitted to the pet through a mosquito bite. The larvae then grow into large worms that lodge in the animal's heart and can cause disruption of the blood flow and death. We recommend Revolution be applied monthly to prevent heartworm and fleas.

### Colds and Flu

Ferrets are highly susceptible to human influenza viruses. They will develop the same symptoms as humans do. They do not get common colds, which is caused by another set of viruses. They will have runny noses, watery eyes, and may develop sneezing or coughing fits, and be off food for several days. There is usually no need for any medications, just tender loving care and lots of rest for five to seven days. Occasionally a pet may have diarrhea, but if this condition is profuse, bloody or accompanied by straining or crying, your veterinarian should be contacted immediately. If, however, your pet completely loses its appetite, develops green or yellow eye discharges, or becomes depressed or lethargic, please call your veterinarian right away. Some viral flu infections may require more supportive care or a secondary bacterial infection may require antibiotics.

### Foreign Bodies in the stomach and intestine –

As mentioned previously, ferrets are very prone to eating rubber, and they are also prone to developing hairballs. Other items that ferrets have been known to eat include soft plastic items, cotton balls, bones, and towels. The signs of a foreign body that has found its way into the digestive tract are varied depending on where the material has lodged. Some of the signs that

might be noted are gradual wasting, extreme depression or lethargy, vomiting, persistent dark tarry stools and loss of appetite. If any of these signs are present in your pet, do not wait to have him examined by your veterinarian. **Extreme lethargy or depression is an emergency!**

### **Geriatric Diseases**

Unfortunately the average life span of the American ferret is only five to seven years. Starting at about three years of age we see a marked increase in a variety of diseases in the ferret. Cancer is very common, along with liver, kidney and heart disease. Please refer to our handout called Senior Citizens for recommendations on veterinary and home care for these special pets.



### **Adrenal Disease**

Ferrets have a very high incidence of adrenal and other endocrine gland diseases. It is estimated that 40% of ferrets over the age of 3 years are suffering from adrenal disease. Recent research performed by well known small mammal veterinarian Kathy Johnson-Delaney in Seattle, Washington has suggested that early spay/neuter of ferrets is the likely cause of Adrenal Hyperplasia. Adrenal Hyperplasia is a condition where the adrenal glands produce excessive amounts of hormones including reproductive hormones. The disease can progress to a tumor of the adrenal gland and can eventually be fatal. The current thinking is that when a ferret is spayed or neutered before puberty, the adrenal gland takes over the roll of reproductive hormone producer for the body. Because the adrenal gland was not intended to produce reproductive hormones, these hormone levels are produced in excessive amounts as are the hormones the adrenal gland normally produces. Symptoms can include hair loss, itchiness, difficulty urinating due to enlarged prostate in males, and a swollen vulva in females.

Recent research has shown promising response in ferrets with adrenal disease to a family of drugs called gonadotropin-releasing hormone (GnRH) agonists. These drugs are used to decrease the body's production of reproductive hormones. Suprelorin (deslorelin acetate) is one of these drugs and can be used to treat or prevent adrenal disease in ferrets.

### **Fatal Anemia of Females (for unspayed females only)**

When the female ferret goes into her heat cycle, she will remain in that care until she is bred by a male. During this heat period, the levels of the female hormone, estrogen, are very high and it can have a very damaging effect on the bone marrow. The hormone causes the bone marrow to gradually stop producing white blood cells and red blood cells. The condition comes on so slowly, that by the time the external signs of anemia are seen, the condition in the bone marrow is irreversible and the ferret may die despite therapy.

The condition is totally preventable by having your pet spayed. The operation should be performed by the time the pet is six months of age. If your ferret comes into heat prior to that time, she can be safely operated on even while she is in heat. If you wish to breed you pet, but do not wish to do it during a particular heat cycle, then a hormone injection can be given to take her out of heat temporarily. However, these injections should not be used instead of spaying if you have no intention of breeding your pet.

### **Strong Body Odors**

Ferrets produce oily secretions on the skin that have a very strong odor in mature intact males

and females. The odor is under the control of sex hormones, so when your pet is neutered, the odor is largely eliminated. There is also an odor associated with the anal glands (or scent glands) of the ferret, but this will not be noticed unless your ferret sprays the material, usually in response to a fearful situation or when extremely excited. Most ferrets do not express their scent glands with any frequency, and if they do, the odor only lasts a few minutes. Therefore, it is unnecessary to remove the scent gland of the ferret unless there is a disease present.

Bathing should be done with a gentle pet shampoo. Ferrets do not need frequent baths and every two weeks is the absolute maximum. Bathing tends to strip the skin of its essential oils and can lead to a dry itchy condition if done too often.

### **Final Note**

There has been some negative publicity about ferrets over the years. It is unjustly given, primarily through ignorance about these fascinating little animals. The ferret is a domesticated animal, and has been bred in captivity since 4 B.C. The ferrets we keep as pets are not found naturally in this country but came originally from Europe, where its wild counterparts still live.

Being a pet owner requires a certain amount of responsibility to protect the animal and care for it. If children are present in the household under six years of age, we counsel you to supervise any contact these little ones may have with the ferret. If supervision is not possible, then don't get a ferret until the child is older. (This warning holds true for ANY pet). In addition, do not place your pet ferret (or any other pet for that matter) in a situation with other humans where it is likely to become frightened or threatened and where it may react in the only way it knows to defend itself, (other than running away) and that is biting. By being responsible pet owners, we can do much to reverse the bad press that our little friends have received.

