

# Care of the Pet Ferret

## What is a ferret?

Ferrets are playful, friendly animals that can make excellent pets for the right person.

- A ferret may not be the best pet for a family with young children. Interactions between ferrets (or any pet!) and a young child should always be monitored.
- Ferrets also tend to get along well with most cats and dogs, however this predator species may not get along with birds, rabbits, rodents, or lizards.
- Some states, counties, and cities carry restrictions on the ownership of ferrets or require permits. Be sure to research the law in your area!

The ferret is a relative of the weasel, skunk, and otter. Most ferrets sold as pets in the United States come from a commercial breeding farm where young ferrets or “kits” are neutered and their anal musk glands are removed (descented). Two small blue tattoos are placed in the ear at the same time these procedures are performed. Although pet ferrets are descented, they still retain their natural musky odor.

Ferrets live an average 6 to 8 years. Females typically weigh between 500 and 900 grams (1.1-2 lb) while males generally weigh 800 to 1200 grams (1.7-2.6 lb).

## Feeding your ferret

The ferret is a strict carnivore that requires a diet rich in animal protein (30% to 40%) and fat (15% to 20%) plus approximately 2% fiber. Most ferret foods or a high-quality dry cat food (e.g. Science Diet®, Iams®) meet their nutritional requirements. Most ferrets eat many small meals in a day, so make food available at all times.

Cooked meat, poultry, or fish can be offered as treats in small amounts. The occasional raisin or small piece of vegetable is also acceptable as an occasional treat, however carbohydrates should never be an important part of the diet since ferrets cannot digest fiber. Dog food or vegetarian-type pet foods are also inappropriate for ferrets because of their high levels of vegetable protein and fiber. Never offer your ferret bones or foods containing bones because they are likely to injure your ferret's digestive tract.

Make clean, fresh water available at all times in a heavy ceramic crock or water bottle. Place water bottles at a level your ferret can reach comfortably. Rinse water bottles daily and clean bottles regularly.

## Housing your ferret

### The cage

Even if you plan to confine your ferret to a room, you will need a cage for training and temporary use. Large, multi-level cages with ramps are frequently used to house pet ferrets. The minimum cage size recommended for one to two ferrets is 24 x 24 x 18 in (60 x 60 x 45 cm). Aquariums are not suitable because of inadequate space and poor air circulation. The cage should be constructed from easy to clean materials that are sturdy enough to withstand digging. The cage floor may be solid or wire mesh with squares no larger than 0.25 in (0.6 cm) to prevent foot injury. Doors must be securely latched and bar spacing should be no wider than 1 in (2.5 cm) although 0.5 in (1.3 cm) is preferable. Select a cage location away from direct sunlight, drafts, or cold damp areas.

Ferrets enjoy burrowing and hiding, so provide bedding such as old towels or shirts for your ferret to curl up and sleep. A wide variety of sleeping materials are also commercially available including cloth tubes, tents, and hammocks. Make sure all burrowing material is free of loops, holes, or loose strings to prevent nails from getting caught. If your ferret chews on cloth, remove these items and provide a small cardboard or wooden box with clean straw or hay as a sleeping area.

### “Ferret proofing”

Pet ferrets should be allowed time in a supervised, ferret-proofed exercise area for a minimum of 2 hours daily. Although ferrets are nocturnal, they will adjust their activity schedule to their human family’s routine without much difficulty.

Ferret proofing protects your pet from household dangers. Before allowing your ferret to explore, get down on your hands and knees and think like an inquisitive, lively ferret!

- Ferrets are capable of squeezing into very narrow spaces. Seal any opening with wire mesh or wood. Even holes as small as 2 x 2 inches (5 cm x 5 cm) should be blocked. (Be sure to leave ventilation around appliances intact).
- Remove recliners and sofa beds from the ferret-proofed areas. The levers and springs underneath have crushed many curious ferrets.
- Keep all foam or rubber items that ferrets enjoy chewing off the floor and out of reach. Prevent access to stereo speakers, sponges, headphones, rubber-soled shoes, pipe insulation, rubber bands, erasers, rubber toys or balls. When ingested, spongy items can cause intestinal blockages.
- Prevent your ferret from burrowing into the bottom of furniture or mattresses by covering these areas with thin plywood or Plexiglas®. Burrowing not only damages furniture, but your ferret can eat the foam rubber inside and develop intestinal blockage.
- Remove potentially toxic or irritating substances such as plants, household cleaners, insecticides, or rodenticides.
- Always double-check your dishwasher, refrigerator, clothes washer and dryer before shutting the door and turning them on.

## Litter pans

Ferrets normally select a latrine area by backing up to a vertical surface to eliminate. Most ferrets can be litter pan trained, especially when started at a young age.

- Place a small, low-sided pan in the cage corner your pet has already selected as a latrine.
- Place a second pan in the corner of the ferret proofed exercise room.
- Provide a thin layer of litter. Kits will often play and burrow in clay or clumping litter. Pelleted litter such as recycled newspaper products or natural fiber litters are preferable as they are cleaner, more absorbent, non-toxic if swallowed, and compostable.

Ferrets do not cover up their waste so spot clean daily and change litter several times a week to minimize odor. If your ferret is allowed to exercise over a large area of the house, place litter boxes in several locations in your home.

## Toys

Ferrets love toys, but be very careful when selecting them:

- Do NOT give your pet any latex rubber or foam toys since they are likely to be ingested.
- DO offer tunnel-type toys such as large cardboard mailing tubes, dryer hoses, paper bags, and PVC piping to stimulate normal activity like burrowing.
- DO provide cloth toys, but only if your ferret does not readily chew fabric on.
- DO remove buttons and eyes from cloth toys before offering them to your ferret.
- DO select other toys made of indestructible materials like hard plastic that are large enough not to be ingested like ping-pong balls.

## Behavior & handling

Ferrets are generally easy to handle, but like any animal they can bite when they become overstimulated or frightened. Do not hold a ferret near your face, especially if you are unfamiliar with its behavior. Ferrets also have poor eyesight and should never be placed where they might fall off a high surface.

Ferrets normally play quite roughly with each other. Nipping is not painful for youngsters, because they are protected by their thick skin and fur coat. Kits normally grow out of their nipping stage, although some adults will occasionally nip for attention, a treat, or in an attempt to show dominance.

Do not allow your young ferret to nip at you as tolerating occasional nips can encourage your pet to progress to painful bites. The most effective way to respond to nipping is to grasp your ferret by the loose scruff of fur over the neck, calmly 'detach' the ferret, then say "No" firmly and clearly while looking into your pet's eyes. Then quickly divert the ferret's attention elsewhere. This process may need to be repeated several times until the ferret learns what is expected of him.

Products like Bitter Apple can serve as an excellent aid to prevent nipping. Spray Bitter Apple on your hands prior to handling or on your socks and shoes to deter 'ankle biters'. Never hit or flick at a ferret (or any pet) for nipping as this can cause the ferret to bite out of fear.

## **Grooming**

### Toenail trims

Ferret nails can grow quite long and sharp, becoming entangled in carpeting or cloth. Nail trimming is a fairly straightforward procedure, however be sure to have an experienced person demonstrate toenail trims the first time. A treat can be used to distract the ferret during the procedure.

### Bathing

Bathe your ferret no more than 2 to 4 times a year.

Ferrets have a natural musky odor that can never be completely eliminated, and frequent bathing will not only dry out your ferret's hair coat and skin, but it will also increase your ferret's odor! Immediately after a bath, skin musk glands go into overdrive to replenish the oils that were washed away. So for a few days your ferret will actually smell stronger.

Most of the musky oils secreted by the ferret remain on cloth or bedding, so the best thing you can do to cut down on musky ferret odor is to launder these items regularly.

## **Keeping your ferret healthy**

### Vaccination

Ferrets should be vaccinated against canine distemper virus and rabies virus. Most ferrets purchased from pet stores will have received their initial vaccine series at about 6 to 8 weeks. A booster vaccination is required by 10 to 12 weeks of age, and another at approximately 14 to 16 weeks of age. Repeat vaccines annually thereafter.

### Heartworm prevention

Ferrets are susceptible to heartworm. Your veterinarian can recommend heartworm preventive medication if your pet is taken outdoors routinely or if you live in a warm, humid environment.

### Influenza virus

The ferret is one of the few animals susceptible to the human flu virus. By the same token, a ferret with the flu can pass the virus onto humans. If you have a cold, try not to handle your ferret until you are well over your illness. If you must handle your pet, wash your hands first and do not put him near your face. Do not allow anyone else with a cold to handle your pet.