



Domestic Ferret Diet and Care Recommendations

GENERAL INFORMATION

The domestic ferret is thought to be a descendant of the European polecat (*Mustela putorius*). They were originally domesticated for use in hunting but were promoted as pets in the early 1970's. Evidence of ferret domestication dates back to 1500 BC, well before cat domestication.

Marshall Farms, located in North Rose, New York, is the largest supplier of ferrets in the United States. Marshall Farms ferrets have two dots tattooed on the right ear, indicating that the ferrets have been spayed or neutered, and have had their scent glands removed.

The average life span for a domestic ferret is 6-10 years.

DIET

Kibble: Should be provided at all times. We recommend Zupreem, Totally Ferret, Mazuri, or Marshall Farms brand ferret kibble. Ferrets are true carnivores and cannot handle foods with a fiber content of more than 4%. Do not feed sugars (cookies, candy), carbohydrates (pasta, rice, bread), or dairy (milk, cheese) because ferrets do not digest these foods well. Do not feed cat or kitten food because these diets are too high in fat and fiber. Avoid semi-moist and canned ferret foods because soft foods can lead to gum disease.

Treats: Occasional Ferretone, Nutrical, yogis, raisins, or treats specially formulated for ferrets. Flaxseed oil can be given as a prophylactic to prevent Inflammatory Bowel Disease. We recommend mixing 1/8 tsp of flaxseed oil into dry kibble every day. Limited amounts of meat, fish, and poultry can be offered. Avoid any treats that give your ferret gastric upset.

ENVIRONMENT

Ferrets are very active and love to burrow, nestle, and climb.

Cage: Ferrets enjoy large, multi-level cages.

Substrate: Many ferrets will use litter boxes. Most litters are safe for use by ferrets; however, do not use cedar or pine shavings, or clay-based cat litters.

Moisture: Provide a water bottle or dish of water at all times, and change the water daily.

Furniture: Provide many blankets, beds, hammocks, and toys. Check toys for parts that can be removed and ingested. Ferrets also love tubing and boxes.

Free Roam: Many owners choose to let their ferrets run around the house. Be careful! Ferrets are naturally attracted to holes and dark places. Make sure to securely cover holes, spaces under washing machines and ovens, and vents. Also make sure that open windows are covered with screens. Roll up electrical cords or protect them with PVC pipes, and watch out for any small items (rubber pieces, string) that can be ingested.

MEDICAL CARE

Exams: Bring ferrets in once a year for a health check, including a dental exam to check for plaque build-up and cavities.

Vaccinations: Rabies and Distemper boosters annually.

Common Illnesses:

Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD): Immune response to the intestines, causing inflammation and irritation. Symptoms include: tarry stool, decreased appetite, tooth grinding, crying or whimpering, arching back, and lethargy. Diagnosis is obtained by running a blood panel. Treatment includes steroids, diet change, or immune-suppressing medication. This condition can escalate quickly, so ferrets exhibiting these symptoms should be seen by a veterinarian right away.

Adrenal Disease: Caused by tumor growth on the adrenals. Symptoms include: rapid weight loss, fur loss, itchiness, and swollen vulva (females only). Diagnosis is obtained by running a blood panel. Treatment includes a monthly injection of a synthetic hormone-blocking drug, Lupron. Ferrets that do not respond to the injection may require surgery to correct the problem.

Insulinoma: Caused by the growth of pancreatic nodules, which release extra insulin and lead to chronic low blood sugar. Symptoms include: lethargy, weakness, depression, fainting, and blank stares. Diagnosis is obtained by running a blood sugar level and blood panel. Treatment varies, and can include steroid medications or surgery to remove pancreatic tumors.

Lymphoma: Caused by cancerous growth in the lymph nodes. Symptoms include: lethargy, weight loss, and enlarged lymph nodes. Diagnosis is obtained by running a blood panel or performing a biopsy of the lymph nodes. Chemotherapy is the most effective treatment.

Gastroenteritis: Caused by the corona virus, highly contagious. Symptoms include: mucoid diarrhea, green stool, vomiting, decreased appetite, or tooth grinding. Incubation period is 7 days after exposure to the virus. Supportive care is the only treatment. There is no vaccination.

Influenza: Caused by human influenza virus. Symptoms include: lethargy, fever, decreased appetite, sneezing, and nasal discharge. There is no treatment; however, some ferrets develop secondary bacterial infections, which are treated with antibiotics.

Signs that your ferret is painful or in discomfort:

Crying or whimpering

Tooth grinding

Drizzling

Panting

Vomiting

Arching back