



AVIAN REPTILE & EXOTIC PET HOSPITAL

FERRET - GENERAL HEALTH CARE

INTRODUCTION

Ferrets curious, playful and very energetic. They can also be destructive and are escape artists so they must be under constant supervision when not in their cage. Young ferrets are prone to bite and it is often necessary to work with them to change this behaviour.

Ferrets have a distinctive odor. This odor is minimized by desexing, but will always be present to a small degree.

DIET

Ferrets are strict carnivores and therefore they need a diet high in animal fat and animal protein. Quality dry kitten foods meet these needs. Iams and Science Diet kitten foods are the products that we recommend.

Ferrets should have free access to dry food at all times due to their high metabolic rate. Making ferrets forage for their food by hiding it inside toys such as Kongs® or inside a food dispenser can create behavioural enrichment opportunities. Frozen and thawed chicken wings can be given as an occasional treat and may reduce dental tartar build up.

Mince is not a balanced diet as it does not contain calcium and should not be fed to ferrets. Mince and canned food based diets will also rapidly cause dental tartar and gingivitis.

Ferrets typically have a cyclic change in their weight. In the Autumn they will put on up to 20% of their body weight in fat and then in the spring will slim down again. They will also develop a heavy winter coat and then a sleek shorter summer coat as the seasons change.

HOUSING

Ferrets are very adaptable animals and do well as indoor and outdoor pets. Indoor ferrets need an enclosure from which they cannot escape for periods when they cannot be supervised.

The enclosure should contain a food and water bowl, a litter box and a place for them to sleep. A clean towel or old T-shirt make good beds but there are also many good commercial hammocks and cloth beds that can also be used. Ferret-safe toys should also be provided. Ferrets are more sensitive to heat than they are to cold and care should be taken not to let them overheat in the summer. Their preferred environmental temperature is 10°-15°C.

Most ferrets will quickly learn to use a litter box but they will not go far to use them. Therefore, a litter tray should always be in the same room as is the ferret. We recommend recycled paper litter for the litter box.

It is a ferret's goal to maximize chaos and to escape all confines whenever possible. They can open cabinets, burrow into lounges, and can get through a hole the size of their head, so extreme care must be taken when they are out of their cages. They also like to chew rubber, so they should never have access to rubber balls, pencil erasers or the backing of carpets.



BEHAVIOUR AND TRAINING

If your ferret bites, pick it up immediately by grasping it by the skin of the back of the neck and shake it telling in a loud voice no. If you are unable to stop your ferret from biting call us and we can help you through this process. Ferrets do not like harnesses, but will adjust to them and then can be walked outside.

PURCHASING A FERRET

Ferrets can be obtained from breeders, pet stores and ferret welfare organizations. A healthy ferret will be active and energetic with soft and shiny fur and bright and clear eyes. They should feel like a solid tube when you pick them up. Play with them before you purchase them and pick out an animal that does not bite. The person selling you the ferret should house them in a clean environment that is not overcrowded. Before you take your ferret home, find out what it is being fed, if it has been vaccinated and if it has been desexed.

PREVENTATIVE HEALTH

Desexing. Unless you intend to breed your ferret, all ferrets, both males and females, should be desexed. Desexing the ferret will reduce its odor and make it a calmer pet. Female ferrets must be desexed or they will die. When they come into heat, unless they are bred, they will remain in heat and because of their elevated hormone levels they will become anaemic and lose their ability to clot their blood.

Preventing canine distemper and heartworm infection. Ferrets are highly susceptible to infection with the canine distemper virus and once infected they always die. To protect against this virus, ferrets should be vaccinated at 8 and 12 weeks and then yearly thereafter. Heartworm infections also kill ferrets. Ask us about products that can be given to your ferrets once a month to control heartworms and fleas.

Caution around the house. We see many ferrets that have been injured. Common causes of injuries include dog bites, being stepped on, crushed in reclining chairs and shut in closing doors. If the ferret is out in the house always know where it is.

SIGNS OF ILLNESS

Ferrets should always be energetic and inquisitive and hungry. If they become quiet, sleep more than normal, or stop eating they should be immediately taken to the veterinarian. Weightloss, coughing, vomiting, lip smacking, diarrhoea, abdominal pain, difficulty breathing, and hair loss are also signs of a potentially critical illness and merit urgent attention.

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