



CHARISSA REXROAD D.V.M.

TERESA GREGORY D.V.M.

JERRY SUDDETH D.V.M.

FERRET GERIATRIC CARE

While ferrets can often live to be 12 or older, they begin having geriatric problems earlier than one would expect as compared to dogs and cats. Most of the problems that are considered geriatric have a fairly high incidence by age 4-6 years. For this reason, it is recommended that ferrets over 6 years of age have a semiannual geriatric exam, ideally with chest and abdominal radiographs and a chemistry and complete blood cell panel to pick up problems before they show clinical signs. The earlier many of these problems are discovered, the more likely treatment is to be successful at prolonging life expectancy and quality.

NEOPLASIA

Any age ferret can develop tumors or "cancers," but they are increasingly common as the ferret ages. External tumors may show up as a mass or swelling, internal tumors may initially show no obvious signs or may present as lethargy or behavior changes. Your veterinarian should check any suspicious change immediately. Some of the more common and severe types are listed below.

1) Lymphosarcoma - The lymphosarcoma arises as a tumor of the white blood cells and lymph nodes, but it can present as a mass almost anywhere. Lymph node swelling may be seen, or an animal with masses in the chest or abdomen may be depressed, not wanting to eat, or having difficulty breathing. Often no clinical signs are seen until the condition has spread widely. Treatment consists of surgical biopsy for diagnosis, and removal can be attempted if the mass appears single and small. Medications may help reduce some of the clinical signs for a time.

2) Insulinoma - An insulinoma is a tumor of the pancreas that produces excessive insulin. This causes low blood sugar levels (the opposite of diabetes,), which can present as episodes of severe weakness or collapse, especially after exercise or if a meal is missed. Treatment consists of partial removal of the pancreas and/or medications to help increase blood sugar.

Recurrence almost always occurs, but often quite a bit of quality time can be had before this happens.

6321 WEST HIGHWAY 146
CRESTWOOD, KENTUCKY
40014

502-241-4117
FAX 502-241-9777

crestvet@bellsouth.net
www.crestwoodvethospital.com

3) Adrenal gland tumors - Tumors of the adrenal gland cause excess estrogen release. The first sign is usually loss of hair on both sides of the body, often beginning over the hip and flank area. Spayed females may exhibit vulvar swelling and discharge typical of being "in heat." Adrenal gland removal may be successful if only one side is involved. In severe cases, the bone marrow may quit producing red blood cells, and a severe nonresponsive anemia may develop. This is not as common with adrenal gland tumors as it is with estrogen toxicity in unsprayed females, perhaps due to lower amounts of estrogen release.

CARDIAC PROBLEMS

Cardiac, or heart, problems are common in older ferrets. The most common is dilated cardiomyopathy, where the heart muscle becomes thin and distended, and very weak. Diagnosis of a heart problem is based on clinical signs, auscultation of the chest, radiographs, and cardiac ultrasound. Some tumors in the chest can mimic heart disease. Signs may include weakness, increased respiratory rate, and anorexia. Treatment consists of medications to reduce fluid build up and to increase the strength of the heart beat.

DENTAL DISEASE

Like any older pet, dental disease is common as ferrets age. Tartar buildup leads to gum infection, pain and tooth loss. Some ferrets will allow brushing of the teeth with dog/cat preparations (never use human toothpaste on animals; it can cause nausea and digestive upset.) Once there has been build up of significant amounts of tartar, the only effective treatment is professional cleaning of the teeth under anesthesia just like for dogs and cats. Antibiotics are also needed to reduce the spread of the infection to other parts of the body. If left untreated, infection in the mouth can serve as a source of infections to the kidneys, heart, and other organs.

HAIRBALLS

Although they can be a problem in any age animal, hairballs tend to be more severe in older ferrets. This may be due to some slowing of intestinal emptying with aging. In extreme cases, intestinal obstruction can occur and require surgical removal. Intestinal lubricants such as Cat Lax or Laxatone are recommended about twice weekly (more often if a problem is suspected) as a preventative.

METABOLIC CHANGES

Problems such as kidney and liver failure are common in older ferrets. They may show no signs initially, but will often begin to exhibit symptoms such as depression, anorexia, increased thirst and urination, as well as dehydration. Lab work may reveal early problems while treatment is still possible. Usually, once damage is detectable it is irreversible, but it can often be slowed.

GENERAL CARE

Older ferrets are, of course, susceptible to all the problems that younger ferrets face, and they have a harder time dealing with them due to decreased immune function and overall general health. For this reason, it is important to have excellent husbandry in older ferrets. The environment should be kept sanitary, exposure to other ferrets of unknown health should be avoided, and all vaccines should be kept up to date. Any problem or abnormal symptom should be investigated immediately.

Of course, any time there are questions about health, please feel free to call for an appointment to have a veterinarian examine your ferret.

Dr. Teresa Gregory