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## FERRET CARE

Domestic ferrets (*Mustelo putorius furo*) have long been kept as pets. They were originally domesticated from the European polecat. Ferrets are burrowers and have been used for hunting in European countries. There is evidence of ferrets being kept as pets as long as 2000 years ago. Ferrets are popular because they tend to be playful and friendly animals.

### HOUSING

Ferrets do well as house pets. They should be provided with a large cage to stay in for times when they cannot be supervised. Ferrets love to burrow and should be provided tunnel-like areas to explore and sleeping bags or towels to have enclosed sleeping areas. Ferrets find chewing things irresistible, and often develop intestinal blockages from eating bits of rubber, cloth, sponges, etc., so it is not recommended to let them have free run of the house when they aren't under direct supervision. Appropriate toys can include paper bags, large mailing tubes, hard plastic and metal toys. Cloth toys intended for cats or babies may be appropriate but make sure that they are large enough that they cannot be swallowed by the ferret. They should have plenty of time out of the cage for play and cuddling when you are there with them. Ferrets can easily be litter trained - a litter box should be provided in their cage and in each room to which they are allowed access.

### DIET

Ferrets are carnivores (meat eaters). Their digestive tract is adapted to deal with a high quality source of protein, and they should not be fed diets that are high in carbohydrates or plant source protein. The best diets are those made specifically for ferrets or high quality kitten foods. Grocery store brands of cat food are high in plant source protein and should be avoided. Feeding free choice is ideal, especially for older ferrets, which are prone to developing insulinomas (a tumor of the pancreas that causes low blood sugar).

### BEHAVIOR

Most ferrets are friendly, playful pets. Young ferrets do tend to be a little "nippy", and ferrets that have not been properly socialized when young may bite. Ferrets should be handled and played with often. Most ferrets will bite if you have food odors on your hands, so wash well before handling them.

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One concern frequently heard is that ferrets may attack babies. There have been a number of reports of ferrets biting infants and small children, usually on the face. These attacks have sometimes caused severe damage. One possible explanation is that the ferret smells milk or other food on the child's face and is trying to get this. Overall, the incidence of ferret bites is very low, especially as compared to the incidence of dog bites. In any event, a ferret should never be left unattended with a young child for any period of time.



Photo from <http://www.kentferretclub.co.uk/uploads/ferret1.jpg>

## MEDICAL CONCERNS

### *Rabies*

Rabies is one of the most feared diseases that usually come to mind when people think of ferrets, but in reality ferrets are rarely affected. Any mammal can potentially carry rabies if an infected animal bites them, but most ferrets are kept as house pets, so they have little chance of exposure to the rabies virus. Even with exposure, ferrets are more resistant to infection than are dogs and cats. In Oldham County, annual vaccination and licensing are required. Even with vaccination and the low incidence of rabies in ferrets, if a ferret does bite a person, the health department may require euthanasia of the ferret and rabies testing.

### *Distemper*

Ferrets are very susceptible to the canine distemper virus. It is always fatal if a ferret is infected. Signs include purulent discharge from the eyes and nose, a rash under the chin, thickening of the footpads, and sometimes-neurological signs such as tremors or seizures. Death usually occurs in 2-6 weeks after clinical signs first begin. There is no effective treatment for distemper. Vaccination is highly effective at preventing this deadly disease. A young ferret should receive its first vaccine by 8 weeks of age, followed by 2 more boosters 3 weeks apart. Annual vaccines are needed after that. If an older ferret is beginning its vaccinations, it should receive the initial vaccine and then a booster in 3 weeks, followed by annual vaccines.

### *Heartworms*

The same organism that causes heartworms in dogs and cats can also affect the ferret. Heartworms in ferrets cause severe heart failure and death. Signs may include a cough, difficulty breathing, or weakness and collapse. Heartworms are spread through the bite of an infected mosquito. It is recommended that all ferrets be on heartworm prevention all year-round.

### *Influenza*

Ferrets are susceptible to the same viruses that cause the flu in humans, and they can catch this illness from infected people. Symptoms can include fever, loss of appetite, depression, sneezing, coughing, etc. The disease is usually self-limiting and runs its course within a week. Affected animals should be monitored for dehydration and signs of secondary bacterial infections.

### *Epizootic Catarrhal Enteritis*

Epizootic catarrhal enteritis (ECE) is a new disease that was first recognized in 1994. It is characterized by an acute onset of bright green or yellow diarrhea. ECE was initially called "mystery green diarrhea" or "green slime disease". The cause of ECE has not been determined yet, but it is suspected to be a virus. It appears to be very contagious, and can spread rapidly from infected ferrets to other ferrets. In young, healthy ferrets the disease usually lasts 7-10 days, then resolves. In older ferrets or those with other health problems, it can last longer and be much more serious. It is believed that affected ferrets are contagious for up to 6 months.

The typical, milder form of ECE consists of an acute episode of vomiting and diarrhea. In the more severe form, it can develop into a chronic wasting disease, with periods of apparent improvement followed by relapses, with chronic weight loss, diarrhea, and loss of appetite. The more prolonged cases often have damage to the intestinal lining-this is probably what causes the protracted signs. A few affected ferrets will deteriorate to the point of coma and death.

Treatment consists of supportive care. Severe cases may need hospitalization for IV fluids, especially during the first few days. Milder cases may need to be syringe fed electrolyte solution and a bland diet. Kaopectate or Pepto-Bismol may slow the diarrhea. Antibiotics may be needed to prevent secondary bacterial infections.

### *Cardiac Problems*

Heart problems are common in older ferrets. The most common condition is dilated cardiomyopathy, where the heart muscle becomes weak, thin and distended. Diagnosis is based on clinical signs, chest radiographs, and cardiac ultrasound. An EKG may give further information. Some tumors in the chest may mimic heart diseases symptoms. Signs may include weakness,

difficulty breathing, coughing, and loss of appetite. Treatment of cardiomyopathy consists of medications to remove the fluid buildup from the lungs and to improve the strength of the heartbeat.

### *Dental Disease*

Dental disease is common as ferrets become older. Tartar buildup leads to gum infection, pain, and tooth loss. Infection can spread to the kidneys, liver, and heart, causing serious illness. Some ferrets will allow brushing of their teeth with pastes made for dogs and cats. Don't use human toothpastes-these will cause nausea. Once there is tartar buildup and gingivitis, the only effective treatment is to anesthetize the ferret and scale the teeth. Antibiotics are used to reduce the spread of infection to other organs.

### *Neoplasia*

Tumors occur often in ferrets. External tumors may be obvious, but internal tumors are more difficult to notice. Your veterinarian should check any suspicious change immediately. Some of the more common tumors are as follows:

**LYMPHOSARCOMA**-Lymphosarcoma arise as tumors of lymphocytes, a type of white blood cell. In younger ferrets, the most common form is a rapidly progressive cancer that invades the internal organs without lymph node enlargement. Vomiting, weight loss, and loss of appetite may be the only signs seen, and death usually occurs soon after the onset of clinical signs. In older ferrets, there is usually a slower course of illness. The cancer usually invades the lymph nodes, which become enlarged. It eventually invades other organs, and death occurs secondary to damage to the internal organs. Diagnosis of lymphosarcoma is by biopsy of a mass or involved lymph node. cortisone may be used to help alleviate some of the signs and make the animal feel better. Chemotherapy is the best treatment in an attempt to cause remission, but it may not be successful and relapses are common.

**INSULINOMA**-An insulinoma is a tumor of the pancreas that secretes insulin, causing low blood sugar. Signs can include weight loss, weakness, salivation, pawing at the mouth, and neurological signs such as seizures. Diagnosis is by testing blood glucose during an episode of weakness or after a 4 hour fast. NEVER fast a ferret with suspected insulinoma for longer than 4-6 hours. The best treatment is to remove the visibly affected portions of the pancreas. This will improve the ferret's quality of life and "buy time", but the cancer usually recurs. Medications such as cortisone can be given to help raise blood sugar levels if surgery is not pursued or when symptoms recur. It is very important to feed ferrets with insulinomas very frequently and to avoid foods that are high in sugar.

**ADRENAL TUMORS**-Tumors of the adrenal glands cause excess hormone release. The most common sign is hair loss, usually beginning at the animal's hindquarters and spreading forward. There are other problems, which can cause hair loss, but it is not usually so severe. The hair will sometimes regrow, only to be lost more severely with the next shed. Other symptoms can include itchiness, weight loss, increased thirst and urination, anemia, swelling of the vulva in the female, and difficulty urinating in the male. Diagnosis is based on suspicious clinical signs and confirmed by exploratory surgery. If the ferret is a poor surgical candidate due to other disease, an adrenal panel can be sent to the University of Tennessee for confirmation.

The only effective treatment for adrenal tumors is surgical removal. The disease can recur if the other adrenal gland becomes involved. If the tumor is very large, and especially if it involves the right adrenal gland, it can invade into the large blood vessels of the abdomen and make complete removal risky or impossible. Surgical removal will allow for improved quality of life and hair regrowth for the affected ferret.

### *Foreign bodies*

Ferrets are very curious, and will often chew on and swallow foreign objects, especially foam rubber or soft plastic. Older ferrets are prone to getting "hair balls" from grooming themselves. Symptoms of a blockage include vomiting, loss of appetite, abdominal pain, diarrhea, etc. Some ferrets may not vomit even with complete blockage. Diagnosis is by radiographs and possible barium series. If an intestinal obstruction does occur, surgical removal is the best treatment. This is most successful if done early in the course of the blockage, before the animal is too debilitated.

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