



Canobie Lake Veterinary Hospital  
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### **Introduction to Ferret Care**

Ferrets are wonderful pets. Taking proper care of your ferret will result in a healthier and longer life for your pet. This handout will outline some of the basics of ferret care and provide a few tips for preventing some of the more commonly seen problems.

#### **Diet**

Ferrets need access to fresh, clean water at all times. They are carnivores (meat eaters) and require a diet that is high in fat and protein from animal sources. They should have little or no carbohydrates. Iams kitten food for ferrets under 2 years and Iams cat food for ferrets over 2 years are excellent sources of these nutrients. Foods made specifically for ferrets such as Totally Ferret, Pretty Bird's Ferret Gold, ZuPreem's ferret food or Mazuri's ferret food are also fine choices.

Ferretone is a vitamin and essential fatty acid supplement which most ferrets LOVE. It is a great treat or reward and is especially useful in winter to prevent dry skin. Small amounts of cooked chicken, beef, pork, or lamb (with the fat trimmed) can also be used as treats. Avoid carbohydrates/sugary foods such as dried fruit. Ferrets are strict carnivores and do not need any foods derived from vegetables or fruits in their diet.

#### **Vaccines**

Ferrets should be vaccinated for canine distemper and rabies. Canine distemper is a virus that can cause serious disease in ferrets. Fortunately there is a vaccine manufactured specifically for ferrets that will prevent the disease. It is important that your ferret receive this vaccine and not one manufactured for dogs. Juvenile ferrets should receive a series of 2 to 3 distemper vaccinations. Adult ferrets should receive an annual booster thereafter.

Ferrets should also be vaccinated once every year for the rabies virus. Rabies is a fatal disease in all mammals. Although your ferret may never go outdoors, it is important that

he be vaccinated. Vaccination will protect him from quarantine should he bite someone. It will also protect him from contracting this fatal disease should he ever be exposed to it.

### Heartworm

Heartworm disease is caused by a parasite that is carried by mosquitoes and is spread through mosquito bites. Ferrets do not get heartworm as easily as dogs, however infection can occur. Ferrets that go outside (on leash, of course), should be given heartworm preventative. Indoor ferrets are less susceptible and do not need heartworm preventative.

### Caging

Ferrets are extremely curious and mischievous! They love to chew and are very good at it. When not supervised, all ferrets should be kept in an appropriate cage. Rooms where ferrets are allowed to roam should be ferret-proofed. Electrical wires should be hidden or covered so they can't be chewed. The bottoms of stuffed furniture should be covered with heavy paper or cardboard so they can't climb up into the furniture or eat the stuffing. Be sure there is no escape route (doors that don't close tightly, broken screens, etc.). They may attack birds, rodents, lizards, etc. Do not use reclining chairs when ferrets are in the room. There are many toys suitable for ferrets made of cloth, hard rubber or plastic. **ALWAYS BE SURE THERE ARE NO SMALL PARTS YOUR FERRET CAN SWALLOW!!**

### Hairballs

Hairballs can be very serious for ferrets (much more serious than in cats). Use laxatone or another cat hairball remedy 3-4 times weekly to prevent this problem. Most ferrets like the taste of laxatone.

### Human Colds

Ferrets are very susceptible to human colds and flu. Do not get close to your ferret when you have a cold. When there is a person with a cold in the house, watch your ferret for sneezing, runny eyes/nose, decreased activity or decreased appetite. Call us if you notice any of these signs.

### Blood Tests

As ferrets age, they are prone to several serious diseases (insulinoma, lymphoma, heart disease and adrenal disease). Most ferrets will come down with at least one of these diseases by the time they are 3 or 4 years old; many ferrets will have more than one of these diseases during their lifetime. Blood testing helps to spot these problems early when treatment is likely to be more successful.

Ferrets 1-3 years of age should have a complete blood count (CBC) and blood profile once every year. Ferrets older than 3 years should have these tests every 6 months. The cost is approximately \$135 for both tests. It is best to plan ahead for this while your ferret is still young. If finances dictate, the testing can be done less frequently but the above recommendations are designed to provide the best care possible for your pet.

### Fecal Exam

Fecal exams are very important in younger ferrets and in ferrets that have contact with other ferrets. Please bring a stool sample with you when you come for your exam, especially if your ferret is experiencing diarrhea.

### Signs of Disease

Sneezing, runny eyes or nose, decreased appetite or activity, labored breathing, bloody or black stools, decreased stool production, straining to urinate or defecate and fever are some of the more common signs of illness. Call us if you notice any of these in your pet.

If your ferret starts to lose fur, or appears to have a swollen vulva (females) or a difficult time urinating (males), he or she most likely has adrenal disease. If your pet has episodes of collapse or weakness and lethargy, particularly weakness in the hind legs, she most likely has an insulinoma.

Please bring any problems to our attention right away. The sooner we are able to diagnose the cause of a problem, the better our chances are of a successful treatment.

### Human Bites

Ferrets have been blamed for inflicting bites on people (especially infants). This is a very controversial topic. There is no proof that this occurs more frequently than seen with other animals. However, to be safe, never allow children to play with your ferrets while unsupervised.

### For More Information

1. A Practical Guide to Ferret Care By Deborah Jeans
2. Ferrets In Your Home By Wendy Winstead
3. Biology and Disease of the Ferret By Dr. James Fox
4. American Ferret Association, Inc: [www.ferret.org](http://www.ferret.org)