



Keeping your ferret healthy

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Ferrets are playful and active pets. They were domesticated from polecats, their wild relatives, somewhere around 2.500 years ago. Although initially used for hunting, ferrets have become popular companion animals worldwide. Normal lifespan is around 5 to 10 years.

Diet

Ferrets are **strict carnivores**, requiring diets with 30% protein and 15-20% fat. Food options include:

- Good quality ferret dry food – these are complete diets, including many specific vitamins and amino acids required to keep ferrets healthy.
- Raw diets – are commonly used but pose the risk of disease transmission (e.g. *Salmonella*) and antibiotic resistant bacteria.
- Whole prey (rodents or birds) after being thawed-frozen or fresh/freeze dried carnivore diets – more difficult to guarantee the nutritional balance and food health/safety.
- Treats – use commercial ferret treats, bits of hard boiled egg or some drops of fish oil suited for ferrets.

There are some food items that should never be offered to ferrets:

- Any foods rich in carbohydrates or fiber (grains, fruits, vegetables), as ferrets are not able to digest it;
- Chocolate
- Any cooked or processed foods.

Veterinary care

All ferrets should have the following medical care:

- Yearly **vaccination** against distemper;
- **Yearly health-check** (can be done during a visit for a booster);
- ID microchip advised;
- Although we no longer recommend surgical neuter of ferrets (spay/castration) because it increases the risk of adrenal disease, they need a **hormonal implant (Suprelorin®)** applied every 18-24 months to suppress season and breeding, to reduce their typical musky odor, and to prevent hormonal complications of season in female ferrets.

Housing

Although polecats are solitary in the wild, ferrets are happier if kept as a pair or in a small group.

A pair can be kept in 60 x 60 x 45 cm cage (minimum), which should be escape proof. Ferrets are quite active and playful and require, at least, 2 hours of supervised exercise daily. The cage floor should be solid and covered with a deep layer of substrate (wood shavings, shredded paper, hay) but the rest of the cage should be wire to provide good ventilation.

Ferrets require ample stimulation and plenty of toys and hiding places should always be provided. Also, climbing opportunities are greatly appreciated so platforms and hammocks should be provided. Some ferrets can be litter trained and learn to wear a harness.

A water bowl or bottle should be always available and replaced daily. Ferrets should be kept around 15-25 °C, as they don't tolerate well higher temperatures.

Signs of disease

Ferrets are usually very hardy animals but they can still get ill. Common signs of disease include: refusing to eat, vomit and/or diarrhea, being less active, hair loss or having a distended belly. If you are concerned with any of these or other health problems, contact your exotic vet.

Ferrets are also notorious to be prone to some unusual diseases:

- Adrenal gland disease – the adrenal glands produce excessive amounts of hormones;
- Lymphoma – the most common cancer of middle age to older ferrets;
- Insulinoma – causes a ferret to have drops in blood sugar.

Ferrets can also get Flu from humans and develop similar signs.