

# Ferrets



Average life expectancy	5-9 years
Adult weight	0.6-1.2kg

It is important to note that ferrets have a pungent, musky aroma which comes from the sebaceous and anal glands and their urine. Neutering can reduce but not eliminate this!

## Food and water provision

Ferrets are strict carnivores with high protein and fat requirements. In the wild they hunt prey such as mice, birds and squirrels which they eat whole but will also eat berries and fruits.

However an all meat diet is unbalanced as it is especially low in calcium and can lead to skeletal problems in growing ferrets.

The basic diet should be a commercial ferret mix or dry kitten food is adequate. (Adult cat or dog food does not have enough protein).

They should be fed ad-lib (freely) as the gastro-intestinal transit time is short and their metabolic rate is high. This means that dry food is more suitable, it also helps to prevent dental disease which is common in ferrets. Egg, chicken and other lean meat can be added.

Avoid high fibre or high carbohydrate diets as these cannot be well digested.

Diets high in plant material can lead to urolithiasis (urinary stones).

Avoid junk food as ferrets are very inquisitive and will eat these unsuitable foods quite happily.

Food should be provided in a ceramic or stainless steel bowl as they are non-chewable, hard to knock over and easily cleaned.

Water should be freely available and can be provided in ceramic bowls or drinking bottles. Drinking bottles have a ball valve drip dispenser which prevents wetting of the surrounding bedding. They also avoid water contamination with urine, faeces or food. They must be angled correctly and checked for leaks.

These bottles are also prone to bacterial build-up and must be cleaned with Milton at least every 2-3 days. Water must be changed daily.

It is important to check the ferret has been reared with a water bottle otherwise he/she may not use one.

## **Behaviour**

As predators, ferrets exhibit very different behaviours to rabbits and rodents. They are very inquisitive and will explore all available spaces. They also "explore" things by ingestion so their environment must be made safe from potential foreign bodies.

Ferrets are extremely intelligent, love interaction and need a lot of attention from their owner as well as regular exercise so are **not suitable for the owner with minimal time to devote to a pet!**

They are docile and easily handled as long as they are reared with humans and handled regularly but non-socialised ferrets can bite - this is very painful and they can be hard to detach. Like cats, they spend a lot of time sleeping.

They are social creatures and are best housed in neutered pairs or groups as hobs (males) are prone to fighting.

Ferrets love to explore so some freedom in the house should be offered. Regular walks on a harness should also be provided.

## **Neutering**

Unless wishing to breed ferrets, they should be neutered ~ 6 months of age. Unmated jills (females) remain in oestrus (heat). This constant exposure to oestrogen **can be fatal** in one season as it suppresses the bone marrow! Please discuss this further with your local veterinary practice.

## Housing

### Indoor Ferrets

Ferrets can be litter trained and allowed access around the house but care should be taken to ensure there are no holes e.g. pipes in the wall as they are very inquisitive and disappearing down holes is what they do best.

Multiple litter trays are required as they have a short gut transit time.

Electric wires should be secured with protective cabling and **ferrets must be confined when the owner is absent**.

Wooden structures are obviously unsuitable, steel bottomed, wire upper cages are most suitable and should be:

- Easy to clean and disinfect (keeping odours in check)
- Size: 2 x ferrets lengths in each direction

The cage should have:

- Vertical space (ferrets like to climb)
- Multi-tiered cages or shelves and raised sleeping quarters
- Litter tray (they will use a latrine corner if no tray provided)
- Plastic tubing, tunnels and pipes
- Ferret toys (non-chewable)
- Hammocks for relaxation
- Climbing facilities
- Mesh >2.5cm<sup>2</sup> (chew proof)

Wood shavings, paper, straw and hay are all suitable as flooring. Towels, blankets or cat beds can be used for the sleeping quarters.

## **Outdoor Ferrets**

Wooden hutches similar to rabbits are commonly used. The disadvantage is that the strong smelling urine can penetrate the wood causing a very bad odour. Good ventilation is essential and all the hutch requirements of rabbits, including the location are applicable.

## **Parasite prevention**

Ferrets can be affected by ear mites (scratching & head shaking etc), sarcoptic mange and fleas. Please speak to your local veterinary practice for advice on treating and preventing these parasites.

## **Canine distemper virus**

This virus is fatal. Dogs are the main source of infection, along with other ferrets. Unfortunately there is no treatment available so vaccination by your local veterinary practitioner is recommended for prevention.

## **Transport**

Ferrets are often used to travel if exercised and are not that bothered by it. They may be brought to a veterinary practice on a harness and lead but are safer in an enclosed space, particularly if unwell.

Cat carriers are suitable but not cardboard boxes as they may chew and dig their way out.

## **Things to look out for:**

Ferrets may also be infected with influenza. This may be transmitted between ferrets and humans so face masks and gloves should be worn when handling ferrets if either the owner or the ferret is affected.

Clinical signs include; sneezing, coughing, nasal discharge, dullness and pyrexia (increased body temperature). Please contact your local veterinary practice for advice on these signs or any other abnormal physical or behavioural findings.