

# FERRET CARE SHEET



Ferrets are small, intelligent, highly interactive, loving, and highly mischievous companions. They are relatively clean, and good for hours of entertainment. They live longer than many of the other exotic mammals commonly kept, and with the proper preparation can make wonderful pets. With proper veterinary care, housing, enrichment, and diet your ferret can be a long-lived, enjoyable member of the family.

## BIOLOGY

Ferrets belong to the family Mustelidae, and are related to weasels, skunk, mink, otters, and badgers.<sup>5</sup> The term “ferret” is Latin, and translates to little thief. The scientific name, *Mustela putorius furo*, literally translates to thieving, smelly weasles.<sup>4</sup> Ferrets are small, and range in size from 1-5lbs, with males generally being larger than females. There is often a normal, although dramatic, seasonal weight variation (up to 40%), with ferrets gaining weight as winter approaches, and losing weight in the spring.<sup>5</sup> Ferrets generally have a life-span of 6-12 years.<sup>5</sup>

Jills (unspayed female ferret) become reproductively mature between 8-12 months, and hobs (unneutered male ferret) become reproductively mature at about 9 months of age.<sup>5</sup> The average litter size is 8 offspring (kits), but litter sizes of 1-18 have been reported.<sup>5</sup> Kits are born with a thin coat of white fur, cannot hear, and often do not open their eyes until after they start eating solid food around day 21. Kits are usually weaned by the time they are 6-8 weeks of age. Most ferrets are spayed or neutered, and descented (anal sacs removed) by the time they are 5-6 weeks of age.

- Lifespan: 6-12 years average
- Adult Weight: 1-5 pounds, with up to 40% normal seasonal variation
- Sexual Maturity: Males: 9 months; Females: 8-12 months
- Gestation: 39-42 days
- Litter Size: 1-18, 8 is average
- Most ferrets are spayed/neutered and descented by 5-6 weeks of age

# BEHAVIOR

The ancestor of the domestic ferret, the European Polecat, is generally a solitary, nocturnal animal, which really only comes in contact with other polecats for breeding purposes. Domestic ferrets have become much more social, and tend to do well when kept in pairs/groups. It is best to introduce multiple ferrets at the same time, and from a young age when possible. It appears that when introducing neutered ferrets, the least amount of aggression generally results from male-male, male-female pairings.<sup>2</sup> Unfamiliar adults can be introduced, but it should always be done with caution (large area with room to escape, neutral territory, and slow introduction), as serious fighting can occur in rare instances. After new ferrets are introduced there will often be a short period of neck biting and fighting to establish dominance.<sup>2,4</sup> Deslorelin implants were shown in a recent study to make ferrets less aggressive to new ferrets,<sup>4</sup> as well as significantly reducing the prevalence of adrenal disease if implanted from an early age, so make sure you discuss this with your veterinarian.

Ferrets are very curious and will often interact with other species, but remember they are predators, so use extreme caution if introducing them to rodents, birds, or other small mammals. It is also important to remember that ferrets can elicit a predator response in dogs and cats, so be cautious with initial introductions involving those species as well.

Ferrets love to play, sleep, and get into trouble around the house. Ferrets are often seen jumping onto the back of housemates, and biting the back of the neck. Ferret wrestling often seems quite vicious, but rarely does it actually result in any actual injury. There are four patterns that only seem to be witnessed in aggressive interactions, and should be monitored for to indicate the interaction must be discontinued. If sustained neck biting, sideways attacks, defensive threats, and screaming are noted it is important to separate the ferrets, as this is likely more of an aggressive/undesirable encounter.<sup>4</sup> Most of the time they are just having fun, and they will

undoubtedly provide you with limitless entertainment.

Ferrets often sleep at least 12-16 hours per day,<sup>2</sup> and when they are not sleeping they tend to be getting into trouble. Ferrets require constant supervision when out of the enclosure to ensure they do not steal your favorite household items, and so they do not injure themselves. Ferrets are extremely inquisitive, and love to get into small spaces that are very hard for you to reach. Ferrets are also well known for hiding items such as food, favorite treats, toys, cell phones, keys, and computer wires.<sup>4</sup> Ferrets are wonderful pets, but not for those looking for a low maintenance companion.

- Domestic ferrets are very social, and tend to do well in multi-ferret homes
- Introduction of unfamiliar adults should be done under direct supervision, as aggression can sometimes arise
- When introducing neutered ferrets, male-male and male-female pairings seem to cause the least aggression in general
- Ferrets will cohabitate with other species, but use extreme caution when introducing them to rodents, birds, and other small mammals
- Ferrets sleep for approximately 12-16 hours per day, and are most active in the early morning and evening
- Ferrets are very inquisitive, and “ferret proofing” your home is absolutely necessary
- Ferrets are accomplished thieves that love to steal and hide household items, as well as food
- Ferrets require constant supervision when outside of the enclosure to prevent injuries, and ingestion of harmful substances

# DIET

Ferrets are strict carnivores requiring diets high in fats and animal based proteins, and diets low in carbohydrates and fiber.<sup>5</sup> The wild polecat feeds on rodents, small birds, reptiles, amphibians, spiders, beetles, slugs, snails, and earthworms.<sup>4</sup> The most appropriate diet for your ferret would consist of whole prey items (chicks, mice, rats), or a balanced fresh or freeze-dried carnivore diet.<sup>5</sup> Many owners in the US are uncomfortable feeding a whole prey diet, so a reasonable alternative would be to offer a combination of weekly whole prey foods, daily high-quality ferret kibble (meat-based sources of protein), and small amounts of high-quality canned cat food, and other meat-based treats fed 2-3 times per week.<sup>5</sup>

When feeding a dry ferret kibble, it is important to make sure the protein sources are meat-based, as plant-based sources are more likely to lead to kidney and bladder stone development.<sup>3</sup> It has also been suggested that high levels of carbohydrates in the diet may be one reason for the high frequency of insulinomas (pancreatic tumors), so it is important to limit carbs (sugars) in the diet.<sup>1</sup> Ferrets do love sweet treats, but they are of little nutritional value, and should be avoided for the most part.

Ferrets often develop food preferences by 2-4 months of age.<sup>4</sup> It is important to provide a variety of food items (variety of tastes, textures, smells, and different animal-based protein sources) to ferrets when they are developing their preferences, as it will make your life easier if you need to suddenly switch food sources, or your ferret needs to be hospitalized on a special diet.

If you are feeding a dry kibble it is best to offer the food 2-3 times per day, and not provide free access to food, as this practice often leads to boredom. Ferrets will often start to hide away dry food throughout your house if it is left out at all times. It is best to offer the food multiple times per day, alternate the sites of food placement, and offer the food at different times to provide a greater level of mental stimulation. If your ferret develops a pancreatic tumor (insulinoma) it is very important to discuss diet with your veterinarian, as it may not be appropriate to not have food available at all times. Fresh water should be available at all times.

- **Offer a combination of weekly whole prey foods, daily high-quality ferret kibble (meat-based sources of protein), and small amounts of high-quality canned cat food, and other meat-based treats fed 2-3 times per week**
- Ferrets are STRICT CARNIVORES, requiring diets high in fats and animal-based protein sources
- Ferrets have very little need for carbohydrates (sugars) and fiber in the diet
- Ferrets develop food preferences by 2-4 months of age, so variety should be offered during this time
- It is best to avoid dairy products, fruits, and vegetables
- Offer dry kibble 2-3 times per day, making sure to alternate the sites where the food is placed, and the times at which it is provided to provide mental stimulation
- Discuss diet carefully with your veterinarian if your ferret develops a pancreatic tumor (insulinoma), as some of these recommendations may not be appropriate
- Ferrets need access to clean drinking water at all times, and it should be provided in small, heavy-bottomed bowls to prevent spilling

# HOUSING & ENRICHMENT

Wild polecats love to dig, and spend much of their time in underground tunnels. The homerange for males can be as large as 77 acres, and females as large as 30 acres, which is a reason to provide the largest enclosure possible.<sup>4</sup> Ferrets can be kept indoors, outdoors, or a combination of both depending on the environmental temperatures of the area. Ferrets do best within a temperature range of 59-70F, and are very sensitive to temperatures over 85F.<sup>4</sup> Ferrets kept outdoors must be provided heated enclosures if the outside temperature is cooler than 20F.<sup>5</sup>

Ferrets need significant mental stimulation within their environment, as well as protection from themselves. As ferrets naturally spend time in underground tunnels, it is important to provide plastic (PVC) pipes or other similar objects to crawl in and around. Ramps and other carpet and cloth-covered objects should be provided for climbing, as well as occasional boxes full of clean dirt for digging (make sure this is placed in an easy to clean location). Ferrets appreciate towels, old shirts, cloth hats, and blankets for bedding as it allows them the opportunity to tunnel and hide. Hammocks are relished, and one should be provided for each ferret

in the enclosure, as there will be times when your ferret may want some alone time. Additional sleeping areas can be created by building shelves, hanging slings, and for the ferret that will not stop eating the cloth, a cardboard box with an access hole cut in the side works well.

Ferret enclosures are generally single or multi-level wire cages, and two ferrets can use a cage 24"x24"x18" as a minimum sized homebase.<sup>5</sup> The floors of the cage should be solid, and the cage must be escape proof. A ferret could have broken free from Alcatraz in no time, so always make sure that locks and wires are in working order when needed. Glass enclosures should not be used, as they do not allow for appropriate ventilation. Elaborate cages can be constructed from wood, but it is important to cover the floors, bottom third of the cage, and corners with linoleum, plastic, or vinyl molding to prevent soiling with urine and feces.<sup>5</sup> If ferrets are kept outdoors a portion of the enclosure must be protected from extreme weather (rain, wind, heat, cold), a dark hide box should be provided for security, and a heated nesting box is needed if temperatures drop below freezing (32F).

- Ferrets can be kept indoors or outdoors, but must be protected from temperatures above 85F and below 20F
- "Ferret proofing" the environment is essential to prevent escape or injury
- Holes leading outside, or into hard to reach areas must be blocked, the bottoms of couches, chairs, and mattresses must be covered, and reclining chairs should be avoided to prevent injury
- Be cautious of dog and cat toys, athletic shoes, rubber bands, stereo speakers, headphones, and pipe insulation as these are commonly ingested
- A minimum cage size for 2 ferrets is 24"x24"x18", but the largest cages possible should be provided
- Cages must be escape proof, as ferrets are well known escape artists
- Ferrets love PVC pipe tunnels in which to crawl and hide
- Ferrets enjoy carpeted climbing material, towels, blankets, old shirts, and cloth hats as enrichment items
- Hard rubber Kong toys, hard rubber disks, stuffed animals, and other similar toys can be used as enrichment items. Avoid foam rubber, latex, or plastic toys

# LITTER BOX TRAINING

Ferrets are relatively easy to train to use the litter box. Ferrets prefer to urinate and defecate in corners, and on vertical surfaces, which makes litter box location fairly simple. Start out with typical ferret litter boxes (low sides, and raised back), and place one in each corner of the enclosure. Your ferret will generally decide which box is preferred, and the others can then be removed. The other litter boxes can then be brought outside of the enclosure and placed in the corners of the “ferret-proofed” play area for use while playing.

It is best to use a small amount of litter in the box as large amounts tend to result in digging, and can be quite messy. Ferrets do not bury their

waste like cats. Young ferrets often like to play in the box, but they usually quickly grow out of this behavior. Pelleted litters, and recycled paper litter products are well tolerated. Avoid clumping cat litter, cedar, and pine shavings as these can cause problems if ingested, or tend to be irritating to the respiratory tract.

Ferrets have a very short intestinal tract, so they use the litter box frequently. They generally use the box after waking, after eating, and at least 2-3 other times during the day.<sup>4</sup> It is often helpful to place the ferret in the box at the beginning of any play sessions outside of the enclosure to help prevent accidents outside the box. Do not scold the ferret if it misses the litter box as this will often lead to fear reactions.

- Ferrets can be litter box trained relatively easily
- Litter boxes should be typical ferret boxes (short sides and tall back)
- Litter boxes should be placed in all corners of the enclosure to start, and then the ferret will decide on which one to use
- Ferrets do not bury excrement like cats, so only a small amount of litter (pelleted or shredded recycled paper) should be provided to prevent playing in the box
- Ferrets use the litter box frequently, and should have easy access when playing outside of the enclosure
- Do not scold your ferret if it has an accident outside of the litter box

# RECOMMENDED VETERINARY CARE

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With proper care your ferret will be a healthy, and long-lived member of the family. It is important to develop a good relationship with a veterinarian who is experienced with ferret care. Ferrets need to be vaccinated for distemper and rabies virus, and you should expect to wait in the hospital for 20-30 minutes to ensure there is no reaction to the vaccine. Deslorelin implants should be considered, as they have been shown to significantly reduce the development of adrenal disease. Due to the high prevalence of pancreatic tumors (insulinomas) it is important to have your ferret's blood glucose monitored at least 2 times yearly in ferrets over 3 years of age. Ferrets should receive a monthly flea and heartworm preventative, as they are susceptible to these easily

preventable diseases. Below are the recommendations of Ohana Animal Hospital for the general care of your ferret.

- Complete physical examination every 6-12 months depending on age
- Annual vaccinations for rabies virus
- Annual vaccinations for distemper virus, but discuss with your veterinarian as vaccination schedules change in regards to this vaccine
- A fecal examination should be performed for any newly acquired ferrets, or yearly for outdoor ferrets
- Nail trims as needed, if you cannot do this at home
- Monthly flea and heartworm preventatives
- Full dental examination with cleaning, scaling, and polishing as needed
- Deslorelin implant placed every 16 months to decrease likelihood of adrenal disease
- Ferrets over 3: annual blood work and glucose check
- Ferrets over 5: semi-annual blood work and glucose check, 2 view x-rays to evaluate for heart disease

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