



Your Pet Ferret



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Please note: I am not a ferret expert, and I did not write, nor did I independently verify, all the information in this packet. I have done my best to include only accurate and useful information, but I cannot guarantee that what is contained in this document, whether written by me or by one of the contributors, is correct, or even that following the advice herein won't be harmful to you or your ferret in some way. For advice from an expert, consult one of the several books available, or, especially in the case of a suspected medical problem, a veterinarian who is familiar with the treatment of ferrets. — *Pamela Greene*

1. About ferrets

What are ferrets? Do they make good pets?

Ferrets, *Mustela furo* (sometimes called *Mustela putorius furo*), are domestic animals, cousins of weasels, skunks and otters. They are not rodents; taxonomically they're in between cats and dogs, a little closer to dogs. They are not wild animals. It's not entirely clear when they were domesticated, but it was a long time ago, perhaps two or three thousand years. If a pet ferret got free it would probably not survive long; it would die of dehydration or starvation within a few days.

They are friendly and make excellent pets. If you've never met one before, the easiest way to think of them is somewhere between cats and dogs in personality, but a lot smaller. Some are cuddly, others more independent; they vary a lot, just like other pets. They are very playful, and they don't lose much of that playfulness as they get older. They are also very intelligent, inquisitive and remarkably determined, which is part of their charm but can also be a bit of a bother. They do know and love you, though for some of them it can take a few months to bond.

Ferrets can be trained to use a litter box and to do tricks, and most of them love to go places with you, riding on a shoulder or in a bag. They sleep a lot, and they don't particularly mind staying in small places (a cage, for instance, or a shoulder bag) temporarily, although they need to run around and play for at least a couple of hours a day. A "single" ferret won't be terribly lonely, but the fun of watching two or three playing together is easily worth the small extra trouble. Barring accidents, ferrets typically live six to ten years.

Ferrets have lots of good points as pets, but there are some negatives as well. Like kittens and puppies, they require a lot of care and training at first. They're "higher maintenance" than cats; they'll take more of your time and attention. Although most ferrets get along reasonably well with cats and dogs, it's not guaranteed, so if you have large pets (particularly dogs of breeds commonly used for hunting), keep that in mind. Likewise, small children and ferrets are both very excitable, and the combination might be too much.

Finally, the importance of ferretproofing must be emphasized. Ferrets are less destructive than cats, but they love to get into *everything*, so you'll need to make sure they can't hurt themselves or your possessions. They like to steal small (and not so small!) objects and stash them under chairs and behind furniture. They like to chew on spongy, springy things, which must be kept out of reach or they'll swallow pieces. Accessible boxes, bags, and trash cans will be crawled in, and houseplants within reach are liable to lose all their dirt to joyful digging. Finally, many ferrets tend to scratch and dig at the carpet, especially near doors. Naturally, these traits vary from one ferret to another, but they're all pretty common. If you're not willing to take the necessary time to protect your property and your pet, a ferret may not be for you.

Are ferrets good pets for children?

Children must be carefully supervised with *any* pet, but despite the myths you may have heard, there's no particular problem with ferrets and children. Many people have both children and ferrets without problems, but there's a difference between having both children and pets, and getting a pet for your child. A youngster shouldn't be given full responsibility for taking care of a ferret, any more than he could care for a dog or cat. A living creature needs, and deserves, to be treated with more care and attention than a toy.

Which color is the best? Male or female? What age?

As with people, a ferret's inherent personality is more important than color or gender. There's no consistent personality difference between a (neutered) male and a female, though males are generally considerably larger, around 18" and 3-5 pounds, compared to 15" and 1-3 pounds for females. If you're getting an unneutered ferret, bear in mind that the cost to spay a female can be higher than the cost to neuter a male. (You will *need* to have your ferret "altered" if that hasn't already been done. Whole males smell very strong when in season, and whole females risk becoming anemic and dying.)

Adults tend to be a bit calmer and may already be litter- and nip-trained, but they are larger and may have acquired bad habits, too. Kits are very cute, and their small size can be less intimidating for a new owner, but they require more care and training and will become very active before too long.

How many should I get? All at once, or one at a time?

Ferrets don't need other ferrets to be happy, but if you won't be around much, two or more will keep each other company. They'll also be more fun, but more responsibility. You can always get one now and another later; there's usually no problem mixing neutered/spayed ferrets of either gender in any combination.

Ferret play can look and sound pretty rough, especially the kinds of dominance "arguments" an established ferret is likely to have with a new one. Try introducing them in a neutral area and giving them all a bath right away to confuse their sense of smell. They rarely injure each other, but careful supervision is required at first. Keeping a new ferret separated, but in sight/smell of the old one (e.g., in a neighboring cage) and trading bedding between them every few days can help speed familiarity, and within a week or two they will probably get along fine. Of course, extreme cases do exist, and once in a while there's just no way to persuade an established ferret and a newcomer to accept each other.

Will my ferret get along with my other pets?

Most ferrets don't get along with birds, fish, rabbits, rodents, lizards, and the like, though there are some exceptions. For a dog or cat, introduce them *slowly*. Give the new animal a chance to explore the territory before introducing it to the other pets one at a time. For the first week or so, hold both animals (two humans is handy here) and just let them smell each other a few times a day. Over the next week or two, gradually give each animal a bit more freedom, watching them closely, until they're used to each other. Once you're convinced that they're used to each other and get along all right, let them interact freely, but supervise them for a while to be sure.

2. Getting a ferret

What will I need to take care of my new ferret?

You will need food and a food dish, a water dish or bottle, litter boxes and litter, towels or old clothing for bedding, a cage, ferret or baby shampoo, pet nail clippers (large human-nail clippers work too), toys, and a good veterinarian. Strongly recommended are a box or basket to sleep in, and Linatone or Ferretone. Optional are Bitter Apple or something similar, a collar and bell, and a harness and leash. More information can be found below.

Ferretone and Linatone are similar vitamin supplements that nearly every ferret considers a wonderful treat, although the recommended dosage on the bottle is generally considered far too high; a few drops a day is plenty. Bitter Apple is a bad-tasting liquid or paste intended to stop pets from chewing things. The paste will probably be much more effective. You may want an H-type harness and a leash; ferrets don't usually bolt when taken outdoors, but they definitely wander off and get lost easily, so you'll have to watch yours closely. Ferrets love to play in, and empty, water bowls, so you might want to give them a rabbit-type water bottle too, in case their bowl gets spilled.

You will almost certainly need more than one litter pan, particularly if you have a large home. Small-size cat litter pans work fine, and for a travel cage or shoulder bag you can use a Rubbermaid-type plastic container intended for bread or ice cream (about 6 X 9 X 5 inches, or 15 X 23 X 13 cm). Make sure the sides of the pan are pretty high, since ferrets habitually back into corners to deposit their wastes and you don't want messes over the sides of the pan. However, one side of the pan should be low enough that your ferret can get in and out easily.

Do I need a cage? How should I set it up?

Many people keep their ferrets in a cage or very well-ferretproofed room whenever they can't be supervised. This drastically reduces the risks of digestive-tract blockages from swallowing indigestible objects, injury, and escape. However, even if you plan to let your ferrets have the run of the house at all times, you'll want a cage at first for litter-training and other kinds of training as well as for temporary use. If you plan to keep your ferret caged whenever you're not home, and you'll be gone most of the day, a reasonable cage size is about 2 X 3 feet and 2 feet high (60 X 100 X 60 cm). A second or third ferret could share that size cage. If you'll only be using the cage temporarily, such as when you're vacuuming or taking your pet on a weekend trip, 1 X 2 X 1 feet (30 X 60 X 30 cm) is sufficient for one or two ferrets. Of course, the bigger the cage, the better. For trips around town, a shoulder or duffel bag equipped with a litter pan and mesh window works well..

In the cage, you'll want some sort of "bedroom" for your pet. A ferret won't be very happy sleeping on the open floor of a cage, even on (or, more likely, under) a towel, but any small cardboard box or basket works well as a bedroom. Old towels or sweatshirts make excellent bedding, as long as they aren't too easily chewed to bits. Don't use wood shavings; they make a lot of dust and oils that are bad to breathe, and they're completely unnecessary.

Other than food, water, a litter pan, bedding, and a bedroom, what you put in your ferret's cage is largely up to you. Hammocks made from old jeans or shirts and a set of metal eyelets are very popular, and ramps, ledges, tunnels, and toys will also be enjoyed. Just be sure nothing you put in your ferret's cage could hurt him, whether by catching a toe, being swallowed, or some other way. Also be sure your cage door fastens securely, perhaps even with a small lock, because ferrets can be very determined and intelligent escape artists.

What kind of litter should I use?

Some people have had problems with the clumping varieties of litter, which can get into ferrets' noses or rectums where it clumps and causes problems. You may not want to take the chance. Likewise, wood chips are not recommended, for the same reasons that they don't make good bedding. Other than that, any kind of litter meant for cats is okay for ferrets. Compressed wood pellets are particularly popular, whether the type sold as cat litter or plain wood stove pellets, which are much cheaper. If your pet is used to one litter and you switch, it may take a while for him to connect the scent of the new litter with where he's supposed to go. (Also see the section on litter training.)

What kind of collar/bell/tag should I use?

Tags and bells are recommended, especially for ferrets who have the run of the house. There's always the chance that your ferret will escape, and even just around the house it gives enormous peace of mind to be able to tell where they are! For walks, you'll probably want an H-type harness, but that's a little much to leave on all the time. Most ferrets don't seem to mind wearing a collar or bell, although it may take them a day or two to get used to them.

Depending on your ferret, either a nylon kitten collar, a thin, flat leather puppy collar, or a piece of ball chain (like that used for lamps or toilets) will work well. Some ferrets will scratch at a nylon collar, which pulls the threads and can tighten the collar dangerously. Also, both nylon and leather can shrink if they get wet, so never leave a wet collar on your pet; it may choke him as it dries. Make sure to leave the collar loose enough that your pet can slip out if he gets caught on something: better a lost collar than a choked or panicked ferret!

A small cat bell and small-size plastic tag have worked well for us on a kit as young as 9 weeks. The slot on some of the smallest bells is easy to get a nail stuck in, though, so you may need to widen it a little with a nail file. Attach the tag and bell with an S-hook or stiff wire; the split rings have a tendency to loosen. For a nylon or leather collar, you'll probably want to poke the S-hook directly through the collar, since putting it on the ring makes it too long.

Any suggestions on toys?

Cat toys work well for ferrets, but avoid removable parts, spongy rubber, and foam stuffing that might cause digestive-tract blockages. Most ferrets are harder on toys than a cat would be, so choose accordingly. Plastic balls, with or without bells, are good if they are not easily broken (the little "webbed" ones break too easily). For hard rubber toys, be sure they can't get stuck in your ferret's mouth, and take them away when they start to crack. Avoid superballs: ferrets love to chew them to bits and swallow the pieces. Squeaky toys are good if they're tough enough to stand up to chewing. Catnip won't hurt ferrets, but it doesn't affect them like it does cats.

Most ferrets enjoy playing in a hammock made from a piece of cloth and some metal eyelets, and the leg from an old pair of jeans will be fun to crawl through or nap in. For other toys, try bathrobe belts, cardboard boxes, tennis balls, golf balls, or old socks with bells rolled up in them. Plastic shopping bags are popular, but watch to be sure your pets don't suffocate or eat the plastic. Carpet-roll tubes and tunnels made of plastic pipe are popular too. Paper towel and toilet paper tubes can be dangerous; ferrets have been known to get their heads stuck in them. An excellent, inexpensive toy is a piece of plastic dryer hose about 4" (10 cm) in diameter. Be sure that your real dryer hose is out of reach, or get a metal one, so your pets don't dig through it into the dryer or out into the world.

No matter what you decide your ferret's toys are, he or she will almost undoubtedly choose some household items you never expected, as well. Keep anything that would be damaged with a little chewing, or that might hurt your pet, well out of reach.

How can I best ferretproof my home?

Ferretproofing a home basically involves blocking off all the holes around your baseboards, removing anything spongy from reach, moving fragile items out of the way, and making sure your closets and cabinets close securely. Ferrets love to worm their way into any little hole (as small as 2 X 2 inches [5 X 5 cm], or even smaller for kits and some adults), which can be very bad if the hole leads under a refrigerator or other appliance, into a wall, or outside. Crawl around on your stomach to look for holes near the floor, especially in the kitchen, bathroom and laundry area. Even holes inside cabinets (which are particularly common in apartments, where plumbers are often sloppy) should be blocked. Also watch out for heaters or furnace ducts. You can block openings with wood or wire mesh.

Many ferrets are good climbers and jumpers. They can get onto a sofa, into a trash can, onto the third shelf of a set of bookcases, into the opening on the back of a stereo speaker, or over the gate you thought would keep them in the spare room (a smooth two-foot barrier will probably do the job). Some of them can get into tubs and toilets, where they might drown. They can also open cabinets, unzip backpacks, and climb into some drawers from underneath.

Apart from obvious dangers such as electrical cords (which ferrets don't generally like to chew) and bottles of household cleaners and chemicals (which they do sometimes like to drink), be particularly careful with sponges, erasers, shoe insoles, ear plugs, Silly Putty, foam rubber (even inside a cushion or mattress), styrofoam, insulation, rubber door stoppers, and anything else spongy or springy. Ferrets love to chew on that kind of thing, and swallowed bits can cause intestinal blockages.

For some reason, many ferrets like to eat soap. A lick or two isn't especially dangerous, but it isn't good for them, either; you should keep it out of reach. Also be aware that ferrets like to dig in and possibly chew on houseplants, and some common ones are quite poisonous. Plants can be protected from digging (but not chewing) by putting large rocks or metal mesh over the tops of their pots. If your ferret digs at the carpet, try putting down a piece of scrap carpet, plastic carpet protector or chicken wire, possibly nailed down using U-nails.

Finally, once your home is done, keep an eye out for your pets. Always double-check the dishwasher, refrigerator, washing machine and dryer before closing them or turning them on, and watch where you sit and walk: that chair, bed, throw rug or pile of laundry might be hiding a napping ferret.

3. Ferret care and training

What should I feed my ferret?

Most people feed their ferrets high-quality dry cat food, such as Iams, Science Diet, or ProPlan. It may cost a bit more, but your pet will eat a lot less and be much healthier. An 8-pound bag of food (usually \$10-\$15) lasts two ferrets a couple of months, so the cost of feeding them even high-quality food is not very great. The key ingredients are fat and protein, specifically animal protein, since ferrets' short digestive cycles prevent them from digesting vegetable proteins well. The food needs to have 30-35% protein and 15-20% fat, and animal protein should be the first ingredient and at least two or three of the next few. Because of this protein requirement, ferrets up to three or four years old should get kitten or "growth" foods. Older ferrets can have kidney problems from too much protein, though, so they should be switched to the cat versions. Most ferrets don't like foods with a lot of fish. Soft cat food, typical grocery-store brands, and dog food don't provide the same nutrients, and aren't acceptable.

Although ferrets do just fine on cat food, several kinds of food meant specifically for ferrets also exist. One popular brand is Totally Ferret, which has received good reviews by a number of owners. If you decide to use a ferret food, check its label carefully: just because it has a picture of a ferret on the bag doesn't mean it's really good for ferrets.

Ferrets like to eat in small snacks throughout the day. You can just keep your ferret's bowl full and let her eat as much as she wants.

In general, feeding your pet a variety of foods, rather than just one brand, is probably a good idea. Ferrets are known to be finicky eaters, and if the brand you've been using changes or is suddenly unavailable, you may run into problems. To switch from brand A to brand B, start mixing them before you run out of A. Add B a little at a time until they're getting half each, then phase out A gradually.

Should I give my ferret any supplements?

Ferretone and Linatone (the cat version) are two popular vitamin supplements, and they're pretty much interchangeable. They are also one of the most common treats, since nearly every ferret loves them. Like hairball remedies, too much Ferretone or Linatone can give your ferrets loose stools. No more than a few drops to one pump a day is recommended, despite what it says on the label, and it's not necessary to give them any at all.

Similarly, many people give their ferrets a small amount of a cat hairball remedy such as Laxatone or Petromalt on a regular basis. This can help them pass the styrofoam, rubber bands, and such that they somehow find to eat in even the best-ferretproofed places, as well as helping to prevent hairballs from grooming. Even better, most ferrets seem to think of this as a wonderful treat. A healthy ferret doesn't need any at all, but a quarter- or half-inch ribbon every few days as a preventative measure won't hurt. During shedding season, give him some every day or two, perhaps even more often if he's eaten something he shouldn't.

What are good treats?

Most ferrets also enjoy some fruits and vegetables. Small amounts of these won't hurt, but be sure you don't fill your ferret up on fruit, since he'll need to eat his regular food to get the required protein and fat. Too much of nearly anything can be harmful, so try to vary your treats.

Some suggestions: raisins, bits of pear, a mashed slice of banana, freeze-dried liver (cat treats), peanut butter, green pepper, crackers, melon... Try feeding your ferret pretty much anything, in small pieces. I've heard of ferrets going wild for everything from spaghetti to blueberries.

Although most ferrets love milk and ice cream, they shouldn't be allowed to have much. This is especially true for young kits, since the lactose in cow's milk gives ferrets diarrhea, which can easily cause them to become dehydrated. Too much fiber can also give ferrets diarrhea, so limit raisins, bananas, prunes, oatmeal, apples, and anything with bran in it. Also be very careful with chocolate. Most ferrets like it, but the xanthines found in it are strong stimulants, and it's not clear whether they might be dangerous to ferrets. Onions, garlic, and other members of that family also cause problems in dogs and cats in large doses; nobody knows for sure about ferrets.

How do I train my pet not to nip?

Like kittens and puppies, ferret kits must be taught not to nip. A ferret who has been bred to be a pet and treated well won't be malicious, but ferret play does include mock combat, and young ones won't know how hard they can play without hurting you. A playing ferret may put his teeth on your hand, but if he presses down hard enough to hurt, you need to train him not to. Ferrets aren't mean, they just need to learn what behavior is acceptable.

Positive reinforcement (giving treats) generally works better than punishment. Similarly, don't set the ferret down when he struggles and nips — you'll be teaching him that that's the way to get what he wants. Tapping the ferret's nose while his teeth are on you is a pretty common form of discipline, but it might not be the best. Your ferret might end up associating you with bad things rather than good ones. Also, it's a very bad idea to use nose-tapping or other physical discipline on a ferret who has been mistreated or who acts unusually aggressive or frightened. There are several alternatives, which you might want to try in combination:

If the ferret is biting too hard in play, try using a signal he already understands: a high-pitched "Yip!" (or "Hey!" or whatever), like the noise one kit makes when another is playing too roughly.

Confining the misbehaving ferret to a cage and ignoring him for a few minutes can be very effective, especially if there's another ferret wandering around conspicuously having fun. Stopping the game by gently pinning the ferret down until he gets bored can work well, too.

You can put Bitter Apple liquid or paste on your hands so nipping tastes bad.

Those ferrets who go limp when scruffed often hate it. You might also drag him on the floor while you hiss, which mimics the way mother ferrets reprimand their kits. Obviously, don't be so rough that you hurt him. You can also cover his face with your hand, or hold his mouth open by pressing your finger into it sideways, behind the teeth (being careful not to choke him).

I'm having problems litter-training. What do I do?

Start your ferret out in a small area, perhaps his cage, and expand his space gradually as he becomes better trained. Keep a little dirty litter in his pan at first, to mark it as a bathroom and to deter him from digging in it. Don't let it get too dirty, though; some ferrets can be pretty finicky about their pans. Whenever you notice your ferret backing into a pan, give him a little treat and lots of praise as he comes out. Even if he didn't actually use it, it'll still reinforce the idea. Most ferrets won't mess up their beds or food, so put towels or food bowls in all the non-litter corners until your ferret is used to making the effort to find a pan.

Ferrets generally use their pans within fifteen minutes of waking up, so make sure yours uses the pan before you let him out. When he's out running around for playtime, keep a close eye on him, and put him in his litter pan every half hour or so, or whenever you see him start to back into a corner.

Whenever your ferret uses a litterpan, whether you had to carry him to it or not, give him lots of praise and a little treat right away. Ferrets will do almost anything for treats, and they're fast learners. Within a few days, your ferret will probably be faking using the pan, just to get out of the cage or get a treat. That's okay; at least it reinforces the right idea. Positive reinforcement (treats and praise) are usually much more effective than any punishment, but if you need one, use cage time. Rubbing the ferret's nose in his mess won't do any good. He can't connect it to it being in the wrong place, and ferrets sniff their litter pans anyway. As with all training, consistency and immediacy are very important. Don't bother caging a ferret for a mistake that's hours old.

If your ferret's favorite corner isn't yours, you have a few choices. You could put a pan (or newspaper, if it's a tight spot) in it; ferrets have short legs and attention spans, so you'll probably need several pans around your home anyway. Otherwise, try putting a ferrety-smelling towel or a food bowl in the well-cleaned corner, making it look (and smell) more like a bedroom or a kitchen than a bathroom. "Accident" corners should be cleaned with bleach or another bad-smelling disinfectant (don't let your ferret onto it 'till it dries!), specifically so they don't continue to smell like ferret bathrooms but also as a general deterrent. For the same reason, you probably shouldn't clean litter pans with bleach, certainly not the same one you're using as a deterrent elsewhere.

Although almost every ferret can be trained to use a litter pan, there is individual variation. Ferrets just aren't as diligent about their pans as most cats, so there will be an occasional accident. Even well-trained ferrets tend to lose track of their litter pans when they're particularly frightened or excited, or if they're in a new house or room. In general you can expect at least a 90% "hit" rate, though some ferrets just don't catch on as well and some do considerably better. At least ferrets are small, so their accidents are pretty easy to clean up.

Any advice on baths, ears, and nail-clipping?

Unless your ferret rolls in something messy or has a bad case of fleas, you don't need to bathe her very often at all. It doesn't help the odor; in fact, ferrets smell *worse* after a bath, as their skin glands try to replace the natural oils you washed away. To control your ferret's scent, change her bedding frequently and keep the litter pans clean. There's nothing wrong with bathing your ferret only once a year; once a month should be okay, but switch to less often if your ferret gets dry skin. Most ferrets don't mind baths, and some enjoy them quite a bit.

The first step is to check her nails and trim them if necessary. Put the ferret on her back on your lap, with her head toward you. Put a few drops of Ferretone or Petromalt on her tummy and poke her nose at it. She should be so preoccupied licking it off that she doesn't even notice you trimming her nails. Cut the nail just longer than the pink line inside it. Be careful not to nick the line or the toe.

Next you should check your pet's ears. They shouldn't need cleaning more than once a month at most, but if they seem unduly dirty, dampen a cotton swab with sweet oil (made for cleaning babies' ears) or lukewarm water (only if dry skin is not a problem). Hold the swab along the ferret's head rather than poking it into the ear. There are also several products made for cleaning cats' ears that you just squirt in and they shake out; ask your vet about them. Yellowish or brownish-red ear wax is normal, but if you see any black or bright red substance your pet probably has ear mites — see your vet. You can't catch ear mites from your pet, but your cats, dogs, and other ferrets can.

Now fill a tub or kitchen sink part way with water. Ferrets seem to prefer their baths pretty warm, but of course you don't want to scald your pet. You can also take her into the shower with you; many ferrets who don't like baths are happy being held in a shower.

Finally, bathe the ferret. Ferret shampoos are available, or no-tears baby shampoo works fine too. Some ferrets start to struggle at this point; try letting yours put her hind legs on the side of the tub while she's being washed. Rinse her thoroughly in running water.

Drying a wiggly, dripping ferret can be a lot of fun. Some people put a couple of towels and the ferret together in a cardboard box and let her dry herself. Others keep the ferret in a towel at chest-level, holding her head and torso in one hand while gently drying her with the other. Wearing a terry bathrobe is helpful here too. You could also put your ferret on the floor in a towel and rub her dry, but she'll probably think you're playing a rowdy game and try to run away. Once you've got her mostly dry, put her somewhere warm with a dry towel to roll in and she'll finish the job. You can also try using a hair dryer on its coolest setting, but many ferrets won't stand for that.

Immediately after a bath, many ferrets pretty much go nuts, thrashing and bouncing from side to side and rolling against everything in sight. Mainly they're trying to dry themselves, with a good bit of general excitement too.

4. Things ferrets say and do

Help! My ferret is going bald!

Ferrets shed their coats twice a year, in the fall and spring. The times for these changes vary somewhat for ferrets kept in indoor lighting conditions. Fur will come out by the handful, all over the ferret, and his coat may look a bit sparse before the new one grows in. A bare tail, perhaps with black oily spots or a reddish waxy deposit, is also not uncommon and seems to be a seasonal problem — try gentle cleansers, or just wait a few months for it to clear up. A nearly bald tail can also be caused by the shedding cycle or by stress.

Otherwise, baldness can be caused by several things. Poor nutrition, fleas, a severe mite infestation, and dry skin are possibilities. Finally, baldness is also the most noticeable symptom of adrenal lesions in ferrets. If it begins on the back end and progresses forward evenly on both sides, eventually leaving hair only on the head and extremities, adrenal disease is almost certainly the problem, even if the hair grows back in the fall. See a vet immediately.

What games do ferrets like to play?

Most ferrets enjoy play fighting, chase, tug-o'-war, hide-and-peek, and so forth, with each other or with you. If your ferret jumps back and forth in front of you, grabs your finger, or tugs on your pants leg, he wants to play. They like to explore new things and places, sniff new smells, dig and roll in the dirt. Most of them love human interaction and will gladly include you in their play if you make the time for them. It may take you a little while to learn what each ferret's favorite games are, but soon you'll be one of their best playmates.

Ferrets like to jump and climb. They're good at finding complicated ways up to desks or closet shelves, but not very good at judging heights. Be careful about how high your pet can get, since he may try to jump down. Ferrets also love to swipe things and drag them into the most inaccessible location possible. Protect your keys and wallet.

A happy ferret will "dance," flinging himself about on all fours with an arched back. Chuckling or "dooking" is common too. Dancing or just careening into walls or furniture is not at all uncommon.

What does that funny noise mean?

Nothing: Most ferrets don't make much noise. This doesn't mean they're unhappy, just quiet.

Clucking, "dooking," or chuckling: Indicates happiness or excitement.

Occasional sneezes: If you crawled under bookcases and couches, you'd sneeze too. Also, ferrets have a pair of scent glands near their chins, and sneezing can be a way of forcing some of the scent out so it can be rubbed on something.

Whimpering/whining: Kits, especially, do this as a general excitement noise. It can also be uttered by the loser in a wrestling match.

Hissing: Frustration or anger. Ferrets often hiss while they're fighting, even if it's just in play.

Screaming/loud chattering: Fright or pain. This is your cue that it's time to go rescue your pet from whatever it's gotten itself into. It can also be a sign of anger.

Is he really just asleep?

In general, ferrets sleep quite a bit, even adults. A one- to four-hour playtime followed by a several-hour nap is typical. Ferrets sometimes appear to be sleeping with their eyes partly open, and they sleep very heavily, often not waking even when picked up, which means you have to be especially careful where you walk and sit.

What else should I probably not worry about?

Scratching: Ferrets just seem to be itchy little critters. If you don't see any fleas or "flea dust" (bits of dried blood), it's probably not fleas, so as long as the skin isn't irritated or balding don't worry about it. If you see little white flakes, it may be dry skin.

Tail puffing: A ferret's tail will bottle-brush when he's excited or upset. He's not necessarily frightened. He'd have to be really worked up for the hair on the rest of his body to stand up.

Trembling: Ferrets often tremble or shiver when they've just woken up, as a way to raise their body temperatures. Some also quiver when they're excited. A chilly draft might also be the cause.

Licking urine: It's not uncommon for a ferret to take a few laps of urine, its own or another ferret's. Nobody's really sure why they do it, but it won't hurt them.

Sniffing/wiping/licking the rear: This is a normal thing to do, especially after a bath. They also drag their bottoms after using the litter pan; put newspaper or towels down to keep your floor clean.

Hiccups: Hiccups are not uncommon, especially in young kits, who sometimes seem alarmed by them. A comforting scratch, a drink of water, or a small treat can help.

Summer weight loss, in males: Normally, weight loss is something to be concerned about, but many males lose a fair bit of weight, even as much as 40% of their bulk, in the summer and gain it back in the fall. It's mainly preparation for breeding, but it's common in neutered males, too. If your ferret seems otherwise healthy and happy, don't worry.

Color changes: It's normal for ferrets to lighten some when they change coats in the fall and darken again in the spring. Some ferrets have really dramatic winter color changes, losing masks, gaining white patches, and so forth.

Can I teach my ferret tricks? How?

Yes, ferrets are plenty smart enough to learn to sit up, turn around, roll over, stay on your shoulders or in a hood, perhaps walk on a leash, and so forth. To train your ferret to sit up, for instance, put Ferretone on your finger and hold it in front of him. As he licks, say "Up!" and slowly raise your finger. He should get the idea pretty quickly. The trick to all of these is getting your pet's attention while you teach him. Don't try teaching tricks, or even trying to get a ferret to perform, in an unexplored area — it's nearly futile.

It's a good idea to teach your ferret to come whenever you make a particular noise (for instance, whistle loudly) or squeak a particular toy. Just make the noise each time you give the ferret a treat for a while, then make it when he isn't nearby and give the treat as a reward when he comes to you. It's enormously handy to have a way to call your pet when he's escaped or is lost.

Do ferrets travel well?

Around town: Ferrets love going places. You can fix up a shoulder bag with a litter pan, water bottle and food dish and carry them with you wherever they're welcome. Be careful not to let them get too hot or cold, though.

Automobile travel: Car trips don't bother most ferrets. Keeping them loose in the car is not recommended, since they could get under the driver's feet or through some undetected hole into the trunk or onto the road. You can use a water bottle in a car, but fasten a deep dish or cup underneath it, since it will drip, and put down a towel to soak up the inevitable spills.

5. Basic medical care

Do I need to spay/neuter my pet? How about descenting? Declawing?

Pet ferrets must be neutered or spayed. Neutering drastically reduces the odor of a male, prevents him from marking his territory with smelly slime, and makes him less aggressive (males in season may injure other ferrets, even females). Spaying saves a female's life, since once she goes into heat she will need to be bred or she will almost certainly die of anemia. However, the common practice of performing the surgery at a very early age is thought to be bad for the ferret, so if you can, wait until the ferret is about six months old. It should be done before the first time the ferret would go into heat, but apart from that there's no rush. Breeding ferrets is difficult, expensive, and time-consuming; if you're serious about it, talk to a breeder first.

There's some debate about whether descenting ferrets is necessary or useful. It's generally thought to be bad for a ferret's health to descent it before 6 or 7 weeks of age. Many people feel that the procedure accomplishes no purpose; that is, that neutered ferrets who aren't spraying smell the same whether or not they've been descented. Note that, like a skunk, a ferret will use its scent if it's greatly distressed or feeling amorous, but ferrets can't spray their scent as effectively as a skunk, it doesn't smell as bad, and it dissipates in just a few seconds. How often a ferret sprays depends on the individual ferret, and different people have different tolerances for the scent, so if given the option you may want to wait and see if you think descenting is necessary.

Most pet stores sell neutered and descented kits. Many breeders sell kits that have been neutered but not descented.

Ferrets have nails like dogs, not retractable claws like cats. Although a small number of people have had their ferrets declawed, nearly all owners and vets agree that it shouldn't be done.

What vaccinations will my ferret need, and when?

Canine distemper

Fervac-D canine distemper vaccine at 8 weeks, 12 weeks, and 16 weeks, then a booster shot annually. Galaxy-D is considered an acceptable second choice by many vets. If you can't get either of these, you're taking the risk that your ferret won't be protected, or, worse, that he'll become sick from the vaccine. If you absolutely can't get the ferret-specific vaccine, at least be sure it's a canine distemper vaccine which is a **modified live virus** and was *not* cultured in ferret tissue. This is a fatal disease in ferrets, and you can bring it in on your clothes or shoes, so vaccination is crucial.

Rabies

IMRAB-3 rabies vaccine annually, starting at 14–16 weeks, separated from the distemper vaccine by 2–3 weeks. Unfortunately, some states and cities don't recognize the rabies vaccination for ferrets, so if someone reports a bite to the authorities, your ferret might be confiscated and killed for testing anyway. However, having your ferret vaccinated will probably keep the person from reporting a nip in the first place, and it will protect your ferret from rabies should he happen to come into contact with a rabid animal.

If you don't know whether your ferret has had any vaccinations, give him two distemper shots (three for a kit under about five months), three weeks apart, then boosters annually.

Like any other animals, ferrets occasionally have adverse reactions to vaccinations, typically on the second or third exposure to a particular vaccine. Reactions are rare, but they can be life-threatening. You may want to stay at your vet's for an hour or so after a vaccination, just in case. Spacing the distemper and rabies vaccines a couple of weeks apart may also help reduce the chances of an adverse reaction.

Do I need to worry about heartworms?

If you live in a heartworm-endemic area (heartworm is transmitted by mosquitoes, so it's more of a problem where there are lots of them), you should probably use a heartworm preventative. Just breaking dog tablets isn't good, because the medication is usually distributed unevenly in the tablet. For more information about detecting and preventing heartworm disease in ferrets, or how to prescribe Ivermectin in the ferret, you can have your vet contact Dr. Debra Kemmerer at West End Animal Veterinary Hospital, Gainesville, FL at 904-332-4357.

What kind of checkups should my ferret be having?

A strong, healthy ferret who eats well should have a general external examination and perhaps a fecal check each year when he gets his vaccinations. Starting at 5 years, an annual CBC (complete blood cell count) and glucose check is also recommended. A ferret who's always been small or sluggish should begin getting the annual CBC and glucose test at 2 or 3 years old.

How can I get rid of these fleas?

Even if your ferrets are never outdoors, you can bring in fleas or their eggs on your shoes or clothing. In general, most products that are safe for use on kittens are safe for ferrets. Products containing pyrethins are okay, but don't use anything containing organophosphates, carbamates, or petroleum distillates. Be especially careful with dips and sprays; shampoos are much safer. Follow the directions on the bottle carefully. None of the three common long-term flea treatments — Advantage, Program, and Frontline — have been tested on ferrets, but many people have been using them successfully for some time. Ask your vet for advice.

In addition to getting the fleas off your ferret, you'll need to treat your house. Wash your pets' bedding and vacuum carefully, getting the vacuum bag out of your house immediately. Then use a flea bomb that contains methoprene, a flea growth regulator that will prevent the fleas from reaching maturity. You'll need two applications, one to kill the adults and larvae and a second two weeks later to get the ones that have hatched since the first spray. Of course, remove yourself and all your pets from the house while you're bombing.

Do ferrets handle heat well? What about cold?

Ferrets don't tolerate heat well at all. Even temperatures in the mid-80s (say, above 30 C or so) can cause problems. The first thing to do, of course, is to *prevent* heat exposure in the first place, by providing shade and plenty of cool water, and never leaving a ferret in a car in the summer. Opening car windows just doesn't help enough. If you live in a hot climate, your ferret will need special care — a fan, a bottle of ice wrapped in a towel, maybe air conditioning — in summer.

Ferrets in distress from heat will first pant, then go limp, then lose touch with their surroundings. The first thing to do is to get the ferret out of the hot place and start cooling him down slowly. Cool water is best, but not too cold, since the ferret's body temperature will drop way too far, with him unable to stop it. Anything you can get him to drink is good, but never force liquids into an unconscious animal. After these emergency measures, get your pet to the vet immediately. Even ferrets that seem to have recovered may die due to the massive shock they've undergone.

On the other hand, ferrets handle cold pretty well. If they have full winter coats, they'll be perfectly happy living in a chilly room, say 60 F (15 C). They can easily handle going outdoors in cold weather, and many of them love to play in the snow. Don't take your ferrets out in really frigid (much below freezing) or wet weather, and bring them inside if they shiver too much, paw at the door, or try to climb up into your coat.

What warning signs of disease should I look for?

The following is by no means a comprehensive list of symptoms of disease in ferrets. However, some of the more common problems are often accompanied by these symptoms. If you notice one of these, or any other unusual behavior, see your vet. Ferrets are small. While they generally enjoy good health, a disease or disorder can be fatal in a surprisingly short time, so if you suspect a problem, see your vet immediately.

lethargy, lack of playfulness, loss of appetite, dull/glassy eyes, etc.; lack of bowel movement for 24 hours or more; swollen or painful abdomen; change in "bathroom" habits, signs of discomfort or distress; funny color or texture in the feces or urine for more than a few days; lumps in or on the body or feet; difficulty using the hind feet, awkward gait, lack of movement; loose skin and dull eyes; panting or overheating (ferrets do not tolerate high temperatures well at all); unexplained hair loss (not just the usual seasonal shedding); seizures; pawing at the mouth; swollen vulva; neutered males becoming aggressive, trying to mate, or marking territory; vomiting that is repetitive or has any signs of blood; diarrhea for more than a day; persistent hacking or coughing; sneezing, runny nose, and watery eyes (yes, ferrets can catch some colds and flus)

How do I contact Dr. Bruce Williams? I hear he'll help with diagnoses and look at tissues.

Dr. Bruce Williams, DVM, is a ferret expert who works at the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology. He also operates a pathology lab, AccuPath, on his own time. He can be contacted by email at <AccuPath@primenet.com>. Please include your phone number in your email, since complex questions are often easier to answer by phone. There is no consultation fee, but he says, "Due to the number of calls that I receive, I must reverse [phone] charges when contacting ferret owners and their veterinarians."

Tissues of all kinds can be sent to Dr. Williams at AccuPath for low-cost, expert examination with a short turnaround time. Email <AccuPath@primenet.com> or call (301) 299-8041 for more information.

6. About this information packet

Where to get more information

The full Ferret Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ), from which this "mini-FAQ" was derived, is available on the Internet on the rec.pets and alt.pets.ferrets newsgroups and at various archives via WWW, FTP, email and gopher. On the WWW, you can find the FAQ, disease-specific Ferret Medical FAQs, and lots more ferret information at Ferret Central at <<http://www.ferretcentral.org/>>. You can also contact me, Pamela Greene, by email at <pamg@rice.edu>, and I'll be glad to send you copies of the FAQs or answer any other questions you have.

Your local ferret club or rescue shelter should also be able to provide you with any information you need, and there are several excellent books about pet ferrets.

Credits and editor's notes

This brief information packet is derived from the Internet Ferret Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) file, written and edited by Pamela Greene. If you have access to email, you can reach me at <pamg@rice.edu>. Many thanks to the readers of the electronic Ferret Mailing List and the Usenet newsgroup rec.pets who contributed responses, comments, and corrections, and special thanks to Bruce Williams, Susan Brown, and the other list vets for their efforts on behalf of all "ferret friends". Last but not least, thanks to Pixxel and Rusty, my ferrets-in-residence, for numerous helpful discussions, and to Bob, for being there — and changing the litter pans.

This packet was written as a free service to ferrets and ferret owners, without direct input from any ferret club, business or organization, except as noted above. I am not affiliated with or responsible for the actions of any person or group that chooses to redistribute this information.

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