

For more information about ferrets:

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An Introduction to Domestic Ferrets



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Is A Ferret Right For You?



Ferrets are curious, playful, and often very mischievous. They are never ordinary, and are by no means the pet for everyone!

Buying a ferret means a long-term commitment since most ferrets live 7 to 10 years. Besides the initial cost of purchasing the ferret, owning one means an investment in food, housing (cages and litter), and veterinary bills, which may be higher than those for a cat or dog. As your pet ages, these costs will increase.

Unfortunately, ferrets are prone to many geriatric health problems, including cancer. Fortunately, most of these problems can be controlled through preventative health care and veterinary supervision. Ferrets require daily care; they need to be fed, given fresh water, have their cage cleaned, have their litter box changed, and get exercise (time spent outside the cage). They also require frequent handling and consistent discipline to make sure they are well trained, loving, and friendly.

Ferrets may not be the right type of pet for households with children younger than 4 years old. Ferrets can get rough and nip until they are trained not to do so. Small children may be rough with ferrets and may lack the sense of responsibility needed to care for them. **Never leave a ferret alone with a small child or an infant, even for a second!**

Just as you do with your dog or cat when you go on vacation, you must provide for your ferret's care while you are away for more than a few days. You will need to find a friend who will check on your ferrets, or you may want to make arrangements with a kennel or vet for extended care.

Most ferrets will get along with dogs and cats if they are introduced carefully. If you have birds, rodents, or small reptiles, you may not want to get a ferret due to the natural prey situation.

Please consider all the factors involved in pet care — time, money, health care — before you decide to purchase a ferret. Remember, as a ferret owner, you have complete responsibility for your pet's health and well-being.

Selecting A Ferret

Look for bright, clear eyes, healthy skin and whiskers, soft coat, and a curious, alert attitude. You can't tell just how a kit's colorings will turn out, but if you watch and handle a group for a while you can tell a surprising amount about their personalities. Young kits will generally be pretty sleepy and uncoordinated, but they'll grow out of that soon enough.

Make sure your ferret is up-to-date on its vaccinations. Ferrets are very susceptible to canine distemper which is 100% fatal to ferrets if they pick it up, and they don't have to come in direct contact with a sick animal to get it. Distemper is an air-borne virus and can be picked up easily by an unvaccinated ferret walking outside in the grass or on the sidewalk.

Also, remember that once a ferret gets used to walks, it may be more likely to attempt to get out of the house on its own. If this happens, the ferret will not purposely run away, but its curiosity will probably get it beyond its familiar range and your ferret will be lost. If your ferret is not found, it will probably die. If your ferret is lost, put up posters, talk to your neighbors, especially children, and call your local humane society and/or ferret organization. You are more likely to get your ferret back if you do all of these things.

almost anything, so it is up to you to make sure that what they play with is safe for them. Hard plastic balls with bells inside (not the weak lattice ball type), wiffle balls, wooden spools from thread, some baby toys and durable cloth toys are fine. Do **not** give them soft rubber squeaky toys, foam rubber toys, or toys that have parts that can easily be pulled or chewed off. Another favorite plaything is a large piece of 4" or 5" plastic drainage pipe or a piece of dryer hose tubing. Ferrets love to run through these and you will be amazed to watch them double back on themselves and pop back out the very same hole they ran into! The dryer hose usually does not hold up well as the drainage pipe and may have to be replaced frequently. You may also want to try clear dryer hose tubing so you can watch the fun!

Walking Your Ferret



Many ferret owners walk their ferrets outdoors on a harness and leash. You should practice walking your ferret indoors first before you venture out. Be sure your ferret is wearing a harness, not just a collar, when you walk it. A frightened or mischievous ferret can slip out of a collar and be hard to retrieve. A harness also allows you to safely lift a ferret out of harm's way should an unknown animal approach you. An "H" style

harness is the most secure for ferrets. You can purchase a small cat "H" harness at many pet stores. Ferret harnesses are also available through mail order or at pet stores as well. Avoid the all-in-one figure eight harness and leash as it is not secure enough to keep your ferret safe.

Ferrets being walked attract much attention. People, and especially children, will come up to you and reach out to touch your pet very quickly. Warn people before they approach that the ferret may nip, even though you may be fairly certain that it won't. If your ferret does nip someone, **you are responsible**. Please make sure your ferret is current on its rabies vaccination. Many states now have a quarantine period for ferrets accused of biting. If your ferret is not vaccinated, the person who was bitten may legally have your ferret confiscated, euthanized, and beheaded to be tested for rabies. While it is unlikely that a ferret maintained in a household as a pet could contract rabies, you may not be able to convince someone of this if they or their child has just been nipped by your ferret and is adamantly requesting proof that they have not contracted rabies from your ferret.

Also, do not walk your ferret on very hot days. Ferrets suffer heat exhaustion very easily. For this same reason, do not leave your ferret, or any other pet, in a parked car, even for a short period of time.

Males grow to be somewhat larger than females, and may tend to have a more relaxed disposition. Personality varies with each animal, however, and many females can be sweethearts too. Males average 3-5 lbs. and females 1-3 lbs. As ferrets mature, they develop a strong musk scent which can be easily controlled in nearly all cases by **neutering or spaying**. Ferrets produce the musk to attract a mate, and once they are neutered or spayed, the hormones that activate the musk glands are gone and then hardly any musk is produced.

Females must be spayed or they will die. A female goes into heat the first spring following her birth. She will remain in heat until she is bred or treated with a hormone injection to terminate heat. A ferret remaining in heat will develop **aplastic anemia**, a disease which causes the ferret to weaken and die. Males should be neutered to reduce their aggressiveness and musky odor. Unneutered males can be territorial and may fight with other ferrets quite viciously.

Should You Have Your Ferret Descended?

Ferrets have anal glands which can exude drops of a pungent smelling liquid if the animal is frightened or angry. It is **not** as strong as a skunk's odor, and it dissipates in a few minutes. Baby ferrets will sometimes go through a stage of "foofing" for fun (similar to human children belching or making rude noises with their armpits)! The kit will outgrow this stage, and surgery will not be necessary. Spaying and neutering will also cut down on odors. Descending is not necessary unless you have a very stinky ferret!

How to Care for Your Ferret



New kits require distemper shots at 8 weeks, 11-12 weeks, and 14-15 weeks (i.e. booster at every 3-4 week interval). If the kit was purchased at the pet shop, ask what date the kit came in and give the second booster 3 weeks after that date with the third booster in 3-4 weeks.

Rabies shots can be administered as early as 12 weeks, but keep this shot separate from the distemper by 1 or 2 weeks. No booster during the first year is needed.

For a new adult with no known shot record, vaccinate against distemper and then boost 3-4 weeks later. The rabies vaccination can be administered at any time, but keep this shot separate from the distemper by 1 or 2 weeks.

If you know the ferret was vaccinated within the last year, then only one shot is needed to keep it current. If you want to move a new ferret to your present

ferret(s) schedule, or visa versa, then as long as it has been a month since the previous shot, go ahead and re-vaccinate.

Annual boosters are required for distemper and rabies. Keep these shots separate by 1-2 weeks. In case of reactions, wait at the vet's for at least 20 minutes after the shot is given.

You need to make sure your veterinarian uses a **killed** vaccine for distemper. The only recommended distemper vaccines are **Fervac-D** and **Galaxy-D**. **Imrab 3** is the **only** approved rabies vaccine for ferrets at this time.

While ferrets do tend to be very healthy pets, they may require occasional veterinary care for diarrhea, flu, heat exhaustion, or various cancers. An annual exam by a qualified ferret veterinarian is recommended. If you need to find a qualified veterinarian, contact your local ferret club or human organization.

Feeding Your Ferret

You need to feed your ferrets high-quality cat food, such as Iams or Science Diet, or high-quality ferret food, such as Totally Ferret. High-quality food may cost a bit more, but your pet will eat a lot less and be much healthier. An 8-pound bag of dry food (usually \$10-\$15) lasts two ferrets about a couple of months, so the cost of feeding them even high-quality food is not very great.



The key ingredient is protein, specifically animal protein, since ferrets' short digestive cycles prevent them from getting enough sustenance from vegetable proteins. The main ingredient should be chicken or poultry, but not fish. The food needs to have at least

32% protein.

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 maintenance versions.

Ferrets do not tend to be overweight and should be allowed to "free feed" (have food available constantly) unless your ferret has a medical problem and your veterinarian tells you otherwise.

Soft food is not good for ferrets, partly because it generally contains much less protein than the dry kind and partly because it isn't hard enough to rub plaque off their teeth and can lead to tooth decay. However, very young kits and those recovering from illness or surgery may need their food moistened with water for a

you notice scratching, check your ferrets for fleas by combing with a fine-toothed flea comb or placing your ferret over a piece of white paper and ruffling its fur. Dislodged fleas or reddish brown to black "dust" (flea feces) will stand out against the white background. Drop water on the spots; if they turn red, it's flea residue. Little dark specks in the fur will also indicate flea residue.

If your ferret has fleas, bathe it with a flea shampoo suitable for kittens which contains **pyrethrins**. Use a flea comb to remove the fleas. You can also use some of the new flea treatments, like Advantage, Program, and Frontline, on ferrets.

You will also need to treat the ferret's environment. Change and launder all bedding; treat the area with flea spray and powder; and vacuum frequently.

Caution! Do not treat kits under the age of 8 weeks. Just comb them daily and wait until they get older, at around 12 weeks. Never dip a ferret in a flea dip!

Exercise and Play

Ferrets need exercise and they should be allowed to play in at least a portion of the house where children and other pets won't interfere. Be sure your house is ferret-proofed before letting your ferret out.

Some people get startled the first time they see a ferret play. Ferrets jump up and down, turn somersaults, run sideways and even backwards! This is normal and should not be construed as a sick or seizing animal. Ferrets slide, play tag, hide and seek, and attack and chase with other ferrets, with you, or with other pets too. They may grab onto you with their teeth in play, but this doesn't mean they are trying to hurt you. Young ferrets (kits) go through a nipping stage and this must be discouraged very early. A light tap on the nose and a loud firm "NO!" combined with patience and a lot of handling should eventually be sufficient.

Remember that a ferret should not be hit or slapped in any situation. It is not necessary, usually makes the situation worse, and they can easily be hurt. If a kit tends to be especially nippy and hyper, try letting it out to play and run around for a while (about 1/2 hour) first before you interact with it. This allows it to work off some of its pent up energy so it doesn't direct it at you. Reward your ferret with a treat when it is good to encourage proper behavior.



Toys

Ferrets are very imaginative and kittenish in their play. They like to push things, roll things, drag things and run through things! Ferrets will play with

sweet oil (made for cleaning babies' ears) and gently clean them. Hold the swab along the animal's head rather than poking it into the ear, to avoid injuring the ear. Yellowish or brownish-red ear wax is normal, but if you see any black substance your pet probably has ear mites, which should be taken care of. Your vet can help you out in this area.

Now fill a tub or kitchen sink partway with lukewarm water. It should feel comfortable on your wrist. If you want to let your pet play in the water, fill a tub just deeper than the ferret is tall, and provide some sort of support (a box in the tub) in case he gets tired of swimming.

Finally, bathe the ferret. Ferret shampoos are available, or no-tears baby shampoo works fine too (Pert Plus for Kids is very good). Wet the ferret completely, either in one half of a double sink or in a tub. Lather it from head to tail; don't worry about its eyes if you're using a no-tears shampoo. Your ferret may start to struggle at this point, which may be because it doesn't like hanging in midair while being washed. Let it put its hind legs on the side of the tub while it's being washed. Rinse the ferret thoroughly in clear, warm running water.

Older, sick, or weak ferrets can be gently cleaned using baby oil, which can also help get gooey things out of fur.

Drying a dripping ferret can be a lot of fun or a real hassle, depending on your own preference. It's easiest to keep the ferret in a towel at chest-level, holding its head and torso in one hand while drying it 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 it dry, but it will probably think you're playing a rowdy game of tousele and try to run away. You can also try this method: put a dry towel into a clothes basket; place the ferret in the basket and turn the basket upside down. Place something fairly heavy on the basket to make sure the ferret doesn't escape out from underneath it. The ferret will rub against the sides of the basket and the towel and dry itself. It's been mentioned that a damp ferret seems to lose all sense of judgment, suddenly thinking that walls, cage floors, milk cartons, and everything—except a towel—must be remarkably water-absorbent. 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 from the bath and drying process too.

Fleas

Ferrets tend to get fleas, particularly when the weather gets warm and humid. If

week or two. Note that moistened food spoils much more quickly than the same food left dry, so dump out leftovers every day.

Several kinds of food meant specifically for ferrets also exist. Although ferrets do just fine on cat food, you may want to try the better quality ferret foods such as Totally Ferret or Marshall Farms Ferret Food. You may want to provide your ferrets with a mix of ferret and cat foods so your ferrets can have a choice and will not get used to just one brand of food.

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 is suddenly unavailable, you may run into problems if it's all your pets will recognize as edible. 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.

Dog food is NOT acceptable, as it lacks some nutrients ferrets (and cats) need. Among other things, ferrets and cats both need taurine, which is found naturally in poultry; many cat and ferret foods supplement it as well.

Ferret Treats

Treats should be given in moderation and may consist of small pieces of **cooked** meat or fish or limited amounts of fruits or vegetables such as banana, melon, apple, pear, or cucumber. Try feeding your ferret pretty much anything, in small pieces. You never know what yours will consider a fabulous treat. Ferrets may go wild for everything from spaghetti to blueberries. Milk and ice cream products can cause diarrhea and are not recommended as treats. Never feed bones to your ferret as they can cause intestinal blockage requiring surgery.

Ferretone and Linatone are two popular vitamin supplements. They are also one of the most common treats, since nearly every ferret loves them. They're very similar and can be used interchangeably, although their exact composition is a bit different. Both of these contain vitamin A, which can be very harmful or even fatal in excess. Also, 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, and it's not thought to be necessary to give them any at all if you're using a good food.

Ferrets should have plenty of fresh water available at all times. While most people use a water bottle, an open bowl of water should be offered to your ferrets daily to make sure they are getting enough. The advantage of the bottle is that the water will stay cleaner and the ferrets can't play in it, as they might with the bowl.

Ferret Proofing and Housing

Ferrets are intelligent, resourceful, curious, and frolicsome creatures who love to explore. Because they are such great escape artists, their surroundings need to be ferret-proofed. In the room where your ferrets will be housed or allowed to play, check and seal any openings around heating and plumbing pipes, refrigerators,



stoves, dishwashers, as well as dryer vents and under kitchen cabinets. Be particularly careful of recliner chairs and sleeper sofas as ferrets love to crawl inside them and once opened or closed by a human, the ferret will get crushed. **Recliners should always be in an upright position when ferrets are running loose!** Keep stereo speakers out of reach and guard your plants as ferrets love to dig.

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.

An all wire cage is your best bet for your ferret's home. Do not use an aquarium to house your ferret as it will not allow the proper ventilation that a ferret needs and your pet can develop respiratory problems.

If you plan to keep your ferret caged whenever you're not home, and you'll be gone most of the day, a generous cage size is about 2 X 3 feet and 2 feet high. 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 vacation, 1 X 2 X 1 feet is sufficient for one or two ferrets, perhaps three.

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 make excellent bedding, as long as they aren't too easily chewed to bits.

Don't use wood shavings.

Ferrets can be trained to use a litter pan. At first, confine the ferret to a small area, such as the cage. There should be room for the ferret's food, sleeping area, and the litter pan. The ferret will soon get the idea where the bathroom is. You can use either standard cat litter (not the scoopable type), recycled newspaper litter, corncob or compressed pine litter, or wood stove pellets. 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). Make sure the sides of the pan are at least 4 inches 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 no more than an inch or two high, so your ferret can get in and out easily. This is especially true for a young kit.

When ferrets are loose in the house, they probably will not return to the cage when then need to go to the bathroom, so make sure you have a litter pan or some newspaper in their favorite corners.

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 for both napping and playing, 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 rather intelligent escape artists.

It is highly recommended that your ferret be caged when you are not at home to prevent any tragic accidents!

Ferret Hygiene

Most people like to bathe their ferrets pretty often, since it can help keep the odor down and they don't seem to mind it. Frequent bathing can cause dry skin, though, especially in winter, so be careful. Once every week or two should be okay, but switch to less often if you have problems. Some ferrets enjoy a bath quite a bit, swimming around in the tub and diving for the drain plug.

To clip a ferret's nails, put Ferretone on the ferret's tummy. Move it's nose so that it starts licking the Ferretone, and you can easily clip its nails!

Cut the nail just longer than the pink line inside it. Place the cut parallel to where the floor will be when the ferret stands, to prevent the tip from breaking later. Be careful not to nick the line or the toe, since in either case it'll bleed a lot and your ferret will decide nail clipping is not a good thing. Use cornstarch to stop the bleeding if you happen to accidentally cut into the quick or toe of the ferret. If you use Kwik-Stop or some other styptic powder, the ferret may ingest it and become ill.

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