

Ferrets

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Ferrets make great companions. They're friendly, smart, inquisitive and playful. They do require a lot of care, but it is well worth the effort.

Home Sweet Home

Your ferret should live indoors with you. When you're unable to supervise your ferret's activities, it should be confined in a cage.

Wire mesh cages made specifically for ferrets have one-inch by two-inch mesh on the top and sides and one-half-inch by one-inch mesh on the bottom. The cage should be at least two feet wide by three feet long by two feet high. It should have two to three levels so your ferret can have a sleeping area away from the litter box and food area. Although wire cages are good for ventilation, the wire mesh is hard on a ferret's feet, so you'll need to cover the floor with towels, sheets, blankets or carpet.

There should be a removable pan beneath the cage that's lined with newspaper. Inside the cage, secure a litter box with a bungee cord, string or binder clips so that your ferret can't overturn it. The litter box should have sides at least three inches high all the way around. Small cat litter boxes and Rubbermaid shoe boxes work well. The best litter to use for ferrets is wood pellets because there's no dust or oils and it's excellent at absorbing odors. You can also use newspaper pellets, sheets of newspaper or corncob litter. Avoid using cedar chips, wood shavings and clumping clay litter as they can cause major respiratory problems and even respiratory arrest.

Provide your ferret with a hammock to sleep in, blankets to burrow in and a cardboard box or plastic house for privacy. Ferrets are very susceptible to heat stroke, so make sure your ferret's cage is in a well-ventilated area of your home, and not directly in the sun's rays. Ferrets need at least two to three hours of exercise outside their cages each day.

Chow Time

Commercial ferret food is available at pet supply stores. Make sure that it has 30 to 38 percent protein, 15 to 22 percent fat and no more than three percent fiber because ferrets have difficulty digesting fiber. The first ingredient should be meat, preferably chicken. If you keep your ferret on a high-protein, high-fat diet it will have less waste, more energy, softer fur and be healthier in general. Consult with your veterinarian about the quantity of food to feed your ferret. Use a heavy crockery bowl that can't be tipped over and is easy to clean. Keep fresh water available in a suspended "licker" water bottle at all times.

Your ferret may enjoy the same type of treats that are made for cats. Don't give your ferret any "people food," however, as it can be harmful to your ferret's digestive system.

Health Matters

Most ferrets live six to ten years. Ferrets are full-grown at four months. Ferrets can only see reasonably well, but they have excellent senses of hearing and smell.

Take your ferret to the veterinarian annually for a general examination and vaccinations against canine distemper and rabies. The examination should include a check for internal parasites.

Ferrets frequently have ear mites, which can be treated topically using Tresaderm (topical) or Ivermectin (oral). Ask your veterinarian to show you how to safely keep your ferret's ears clean.

Ferrets' nails grow quickly and need to be trimmed every other week. Either small cat clippers or regular nail clippers work fine. To keep your ferret from squirming, put some Linatone or Ferretone on its belly. When clipping, be careful not to cut the red line in the nail (the blood vessel) as it will bleed profusely. You may want to ask your veterinarian to show you how to trim your ferret's nails before you try it at home.

Ferrets, like cats, groom themselves and don't need to be bathed regularly. They have a distinct scent, which comes from oil glands throughout their skin. This scent is normal and is not a result of being dirty. Having your ferret de-scented won't change this smell, because only the scent glands near the tail are removed, which prevents it from releasing a strong scent if it's frightened.

If you keep your ferret's bedding clean and don't bathe it very often, this will help keep the scent to a minimum. After a bath, your ferret's skin glands go into "overdrive" to replenish the oils you just washed away, so your ferret may smell worse for a few days after it's been bathed. If you do give your ferret a bath, be sure to use a conditioner afterwards. Your veterinarian can recommend the best conditioners to use for ferrets.

Handle with Care

Your ferret will indicate when it wants to be picked up by holding on to your leg or by grabbing your wrist when you extend your hand. Pick up your ferret from behind using two hands, one supporting its chest and the other cradling its hips. Don't ever grab at your ferret or pick it up by its tail, as it may become nervous and nip at you.

Most ferrets like to go places with their people, so your ferret might enjoy riding on your shoulder or in a bag or pouch.

Behavior Bits

Ferrets are naturally curious animals and will tunnel under rugs, pillows and other things. They can squeeze through small spaces, so check for holes and window and screen openings. You may want to have your ferret wear a harness with a bell on it so you can easily track its whereabouts. Ferrets usually sleep 15 to 20 hours a day and tend to be very sound sleepers. If you find your ferret napping, don't be surprised if it doesn't respond quickly to your touch or to any sounds you make.

Ferrets are "nippers" by nature. They will nip for fun, attention or simply to say, "I'm the boss." They enjoy rough-and-tumble play with each other, which includes nipping. You may need to teach your ferret that it cannot be as rough with you. If your ferret nips and hangs on to you, grasp it by the scruff of the neck, remove it, and say, "No!" You may need to repeat this procedure several times until your ferret learns that you're the boss.

Ferrets love to chew, so you'll want to provide your ferret with toys made of hard plastic or hard rubber (like "Kongs"). Plastic balls with bells, plastic golf balls, squeaky stuffed animals made for dogs and cardboard tubing are also good toys for your ferret. Ferrets get bored easily and like variety, so it's best to alternate their toys so they always have something "new" to play with.

You can train your ferret to use a litter box. Ferrets generally go to the bathroom within a few minutes of waking up or after eating. When you first wake your ferret up, place it in the litter box. Don't let it out of the box until it has gone to the bathroom then immediately give it a treat. If you catch your ferret going somewhere it shouldn't, immediately place it in the litter box and give it a treat. Never physically punish your ferret for any reason, as it will only learn to be afraid of you.

Most ferrets get along well with each other and they usually get along with cats and dogs.

Resources

- The American Ferret Association, PMB 255, 626-C Admiral Dr., Annapolis, MD 21401; 1-888-FERRET-1; www.ferret.org.
- STAR* Ferrets, P.O. Box 1832, Springfield, VA 22151-0832; www.ferretcentral.org. • The World Ferret Union c/o Pat Wright, P.O. Box 3395, San Diego, CA 92163 <http://home-1.tiscali.nl/~wfu/>.
- Bell, Judith A., DVM. The Pet Ferret Owner's Manual. Miracle Workers 1995.
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- Jeans, Deborah. A Practical Guide to Ferret Care. 2nd Edition 1996.
- Morton, C. and E. Lynn. Ferrets: A Complete Pet Owner's Manual. Mahwah, Barron's Educational Series, New York 1995.
- Schilling, Kim. Ferrets for Dummies (A Reference for the Rest of Us!). IDG Books Worldwide 2000.
- Shefferman, Mary R. The Ferret: An Owner's Guide to a Happy Healthy Pet. New York: Howell book House 1996.