

# Pet Ferret Basics



**F**errets are in the mustelid family of carnivores and have been domesticated for over 2000 years. There are over 8 million ferrets in the United States. They are cherished for their curious, playful nature and can be quite entertaining. Ferrets have an average lifespan of 5-7 years, but some can live up to 12 years.

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## Ferret Nutrition

In the wild, ferrets are predators and require a diet high in protein and fat and low in fiber. For our pets, there are several high-quality diets formulated for ferrets. If possible, select grain-free foods and avoid sugary treats like raisins or fruit.

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## Common Diseases and Problems

### 1. General Concerns:

- Ferrets are prone to chewing and burrowing:
- always supervise when free in house.
- Ferrets are excellent escape artists and will kill small bird and rodent pets. In fact, ferrets are used for hunting in Great Britain!
- Ferrets do not tolerate hot weather as they have poorly developed sweat glands.
- Middle age occurs early in the ferret, around 3 years.

### 2. Insulinoma

This is the most common ferret disease in pets over 3 years of age. It is caused by a tumor of the pancreas that produces an abnormal amount of insulin. This results in low blood sugar (hypoglycemia) and can be seen by increased sleeping, hind limb weakness, a stuporous appearance, excess salivation, and seizures. Diagnosed by physical exam, insulin and blood

glucose levels, insulinomas can be managed medically or surgically or a combination of both.

### 3. Adrenal Gland Disease

Almost 90% of pet ferrets will develop adrenal disease, most commonly seen at 3 years of age and older. In most cases, a tumor develops, causing an overproduction of steroid hormones. Ferrets will often experience hair loss, which may be waxing and waning, often starting on the tail. Some ferrets are itchy, especially over the shoulder region. Some ferrets are itchy without hair loss, and some have no hair loss. Male ferrets may experience an enlarged prostate and have difficulty urinating. They may also develop aggression and a strong odor. Females will often experience an enlargement of the vulva and sometimes the mammary glands. Diagnosis is by physical exam findings, adrenal hormone testing and abdominal ultrasound. Surgical removal of the effected gland(s) is recommended in young, healthy ferrets, although medical management is possible with hormone injections and implants.

### 4. Lymphoma

Lymphoma is common cancer of ferrets and causes swollen lymph nodes in the neck, shoulder and hind legs or an enlarged liver, spleen and thymus. Ferrets as young as 10 months to 2 years of age may be affected. Depending on the health of the ferret and stage of disease, chemotherapy may be an option.

### 5. Heart Disease

Dilated cardiomyopathy is common in middle-aged and older ferrets. Affected individuals are often weak, experience weight loss and an increased breathing rate. Rarely will a ferret with heart disease cough. Diagnosis is by physical examination, x-rays and ultrasound. Medical management is helpful if the disease is treated early.

### 6. Gastrointestinal Disease

Gastrointestinal (GI) disease is common in ferrets of all ages. Foreign-body obstruction is seen frequently, especially in young ferrets and is a true surgical emergency. Unlike cats and dogs, ferrets with GI obstruction usually don't vomit. Affected pets will show weight loss, diarrhea, weakness, and

teeth grinding. Diagnosis is by physical exam and x-rays. Ferrets seem especially attracted to foam sponges and pieces of rubber. Hairball obstructions are possible, and are seen in older ferrets, especially those with hair loss (adrenal disease).

Helicobacter is a bacteria that causes inflammation of the stomach. Some ferrets develop painful stomach ulcers. Ferrets often present like a foreign-body and may also have bloody stools. Diagnosis is by stomach biopsy.

Coccidia and giardia are protozoal parasites that cause diarrhea in young ferrets. Epizootic Catarrhal Enteritis (ECE) or "green slime disease" is caused by a coronavirus that usually affects older ferrets. Often a new, young, apparently healthy ferret carrying the virus is brought into the household. Because of this, it is important to keep new pets separate for 3-4 weeks.

## 7. Respiratory Disease

Ferrets are susceptible to influenza virus and can become very ill. If any human in the household is sick with fever and flu signs, avoid direct contact with the ferret.

## 8. Enlarged Spleen

About 90% of pet ferrets have an enlarged spleen. This is more common in older ferrets, and is usually a benign condition involved with the manufacture of red blood cells. Occasionally, cancer of the spleen or excessive mechanical pressure may require surgical removal. Diagnosis is by physical exam, biopsy, x-rays and ultrasound.

## 8. Dental Disease

Broken teeth, dental tartar, and gingivitis are common in ferrets. Any ferret that stops eating, or has a foul odor from the mouth should be examined for dental disease. In some cases, a dental cleaning may be necessary.

## 9. Aleutian's Disease

Aleutian's disease is a progressively fatal immune disease caused by an infectious parvovirus. Affected ferrets often exhibit hind limb weakness, weight loss and inflammation in various organs. A blood test is available for ferrets at-risk.

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## Recommended Veterinary Care

1. Ferrets less than 4 years of age:
  - Annual physical examination
  - Dental examination
  - Weight determination and nail trim
  - Vaccines:
    - Distemper- starting at 6-8 weeks, a booster at 12-16 weeks, then annually
    - Rabies- starting at 3 months, then annually
    - To avoid risk of adverse reactions, vaccines will be given separately
  - Laboratory:
    - Young ferrets under 1 year:
      - Fecal parasite exam
      - Ear mite check
    - Mature ferrets at 3-4 years: Complete Blood Count, Chemistry panel, Urinalysis
2. Ferrets over 4 years of age:
  - Twice-yearly physical examination
  - Body weight and blood glucose levels
  - Vaccines based on risk

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## Signs of Illness

- Decreased or loss of appetite
- Hair loss
- Diarrhea or straining to eliminate
- Weight loss
- Increased sleeping
- Itchiness
- Weakness, glazed eyes
- Personality change
- Salivation, pawing at mouth
- Odor changes

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## Useful Websites

American Ferret Association (<http://www.ferret.org/>)  
[www.ferretcentral.org](http://www.ferretcentral.org)



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