

Domestic Ferret Facts and Standards

- The domestic ferret is a cousin of the European polecat.
- Ferrets live about 6 to 8 years.
- A healthy female ferret should weigh 1 to 3 pounds.
- A healthy male ferret should weigh 2 to 5 pounds.
- A well fed, well bred, healthy ferret will have soft, silky fur and long whiskers.
- Ferrets usually reach full adult size by the age of 6 months.
- Ferret age can usually be determined by the color and degree of transparency of the upper canine teeth.
- Ferrets are nearsighted and reportedly can only see shades of gray and red.
- Ferrets have an excellent sense of smell.
- Ferrets are strict carnivores (meat eaters).
- Ferrets cannot survive in the wild.
- Ferrets are believed to have been domesticated for over 2000 years.
- Normal body temperature is 100-103F (37.8-39.4 C).
- Normal heart rate is 216-250 bpm.
- Normal respirations are 33-36 per minute.
- Normal fasting glucose (at 4 hours) is between 80-145.

Vaccinations

Ferrets require two annual vaccinations: canine distemper and rabies.

Purevax (Merial) and Fervac-D (United) are the only USDA-approved distemper vaccines for use in ferrets. For baby ferrets, this shot is required three times, spaced 3-4 weeks apart, starting at 8 weeks. For an adult ferret with unknown vaccination history, two vaccinations 3-4 weeks apart is recommended. After this, they require an annual vaccination (at least until age 4-5; consult your vet). Canine distemper is extremely contagious and keeping your ferret indoors is no protection against this deadly disease. Vaccination is the only protection. There is no cure—canine distemper has a 100% fatality rate.

Ferrets also require a yearly Imrab-3 (Merial) vaccination against rabies. Ferrets are unlikely to come into contact with rabies, and even if they do, have

a slim chance of shedding it in their saliva. There has never been a reported case in the United States of a ferret passing rabies unto a human. However, if your ferret is not vaccinated and he bites or scratches someone, he can be killed and tested. As per the Rabies Compendium, vaccinated ferrets may be placed in quarantine for 10 days, as is the practice with vaccinated dogs and cats. Ferrets should receive a rabies vaccination between 13-16 weeks and then annually.

Vaccine reactions are common in ferrets, and it seems to happen more often when using Fervac-D than Purevax. These reactions can be mild to life threatening, depending on the ferret. Just because your ferret has never had a reaction before does not mean it will never happen. It is a good idea to stay at the vet's office at least 30-45 minutes after vaccination. It is also a good idea to separate your ferrets distemper and rabies vaccinations by 2-3 weeks. If your ferret exhibits any kind of strange behavior after a vaccination, such as vomiting, diarrhea, lethargy, turning red or purple, difficulty breathing, collapse, or anything else out of the ordinary, get back to the vet immediately! Occasionally, ferrets have vaccine reactions a day or two after vaccination.

Reasons to take your ferret to the vet right away:

- Lethargy (lack of energy)
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea lasting longer than a day
- Hind end weakness
- Drooling
- Hair Loss
- Unusual bumps or tumors
- Swollen vulva in females
- Overheating
- Swollen gums or paw pads
- Pale or white gums
- Yellowing of the skin or eyes
- Green, slimy stools
- Dark, tarry stools
- Lack of stools
- Lack of appetite
- Coarse coat or short, weak whiskers

- Swollen or painful abdomen
- Seizures

The Flu

Ferrets can catch the same flu that humans do. Veterinarians say they can't catch a human cold, although many ferret owners aren't sure they believe that. Symptoms can include a runny nose, sneezing, lethargy, decreased appetite, fever, chest congestion, diarrhea—all the things we can get with the flu. Just like us, this will usually pass on its own. In serious cases, amoxicillin or another antibiotic is prescribed to clear up secondary infections. If your ferret doesn't get better within three days, seems unusually sick, or has a high fever, take them to your vet right away.

Helicobacter Mustelae Infection (Gastric Ulcers)

Gastric ulcers are commonly seen in ferrets that have been under stress (a new ferret, a change in environment, illness or surgery, for example). Gastric ulcers are easily treated, but without treatment are fatal. Symptoms can include loss of appetite, bloody or dark tarry stools, grinding of teeth and gagging or pawing at the mouth. Treatment is usually either Flagyl, Amoxicillin and Pepto (or Carafate) daily for six weeks or Biaxin, Amoxicillin and Pepto (or Carafate) daily for two weeks. The latter treatment is faster and usually tolerated better by the ferret.

Epizootic Catarrhal Enteritis (ECE)

Also known as the green slime disease, ECE is a very contagious virus, that as of yet has no preventative and no cure. Symptoms of ECE can include dark green slimy diarrhea, loss of appetite, lethargy, birdseed like stools. If one ferret in your household has it, most likely the rest will as well. ECE is not usually fatal, except in older ferrets or associated with another disease. ECE attacks the digestive system and is thought to cause permanent damage. A ferret infected with ECE will need to be supplemented with Duck Soup to survive. Once a ferret has been exposed to ECE, they can be carriers of the virus for up to a year without showing any symptoms.

Insulinoma

Insulinoma is a cancer of the pancreatic beta (insulin producing) cells. The tumors produce an excessive amount of insulin, which drives the blood sugar (glucose) into the body (and out of the bloodstream) at a rapid rate. Symptoms can include staring blankly into space, drooling, lethargy, nausea, walking like they're drunk, hind end weakness, loss of appetite, screaming and seizures. Insulinoma will eventually progress to death if not treated. Treatment consists of surgery to remove the tumors or with medication such as Prednisone and/or Proglycem, which will not cure the cancer but will slow down the growth and treat the symptoms. Insulinoma is the opposite of diabetes, which is rare in ferrets but not unheard of.

Adrenal Tumors

These are becoming more and more frequent in ferrets of all ages. Symptoms include hair loss, swollen vulva (females), urinary blockages (males), mating behavior in altered ferrets, aggression, excessive oils on the skin causing orange deposits, anemia from bone marrow suppression, weight loss, and thin skin. The most effective treatment is surgery to remove the affected gland. Right side adrenalectomies are difficult since they often grow around the vena cava. Medical alternatives include Lysodren, Ovaban or Lupron. The most effective seems to be Lupron. Regardless of which drug is used, they will only treat the symptoms and the tumor will continue to grow. Without treatment, ferrets can be expected to live six to twelve months. With treatment, ferrets usually live at least 14 months, sometimes much longer.

Lymphosarcoma

Lymphosarcoma is a cancer of the lymphatic system somewhat similar to lymphoma in humans. Diagnosis can be made using a combination of CBC, biopsy of lymph nodes, or thoracic fluid. Symptoms can include an enlarged spleen, lumps or masses on the body, wasting and lethargy. Treatment consists of high doses of prednisone or a chemotherapy using cytoxan (which may cause remission) and/or Alkeran. These will treat the symptoms only, not the disease. Some success has been found using

herbal formulations (like Essiac) added to the regular treatment.

Cardiomyopathy

Cardiomyopathy and/or congestive heart failure is when the heart muscles begin to weaken, and cannot pump blood normally. Very similar to what occurs in humans, cardiomyopathy is a debilitating disease in which the symptoms can be treated, but the disease will run its course. Symptoms can include a persistent cough, difficulty breathing and lack of energy. Diagnosis can be made by EKG or x-ray. Treatment consists of diuretics such as Lasix, which can help keep the fluid down. Stress can be fatal to a ferret with CMP, keep things as normal as possible.

Basic Treatments

Following are some over the counter remedies you can use to help a sick ferret. Remember there is no substitute for veterinary care.

Robitussin – for colds (pediatric version), give 0.2-0.5ccs twice daily or as directed by a vet.

Benadryl – (children's strength) for allergies and allergic reactions. Give 0.5ccs daily or as directed by a vet.

Pepto Bismol – for upset stomachs & ulcers. Give 1ccs twice daily or as directed by a vet.

Pepcid A/C – for upset stomachs. Give 1/10 of a tablet twice a day or as directed by a vet.

Duck Soup – there are various recipes around for duck soup. Basic ingredients include Ensure, Sustical or heavy whipping cream, turkey or chicken baby food, Science Diet A/D, Stat or Dyne, and Pedialyte. Ferrets need at least 60cc daily to stay alive, spread out over the day.

Do not under any circumstances give your ferret Tylenol or Ibuprofen, as they are toxic to ferrets. Any other over the counter remedies, check with your veterinarian first.

This pamphlet does not cover all aspects of ferret medical care. If you have more questions please contact your vet or the TRFC.

Ferret Medical Information



Domestic ferrets have become the third most popular pet in the United States. However, many vets are still not familiar with them. This brochure does not in any way take the place of a licensed veterinarian but will provide you with insights on important ferret medical information every ferret owner should know. If you suspect something is wrong with your ferret, please have a veterinarian see him immediately.

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