



## Ferret Care

Ferrets are mammals, and carnivores. They are related to weasels, stoats, mink, badgers, skunks and otters. They were brought to Australia to help control rabbit and rodent populations.

Ferrets are active, comical animals that love to play. They are intelligent and interactive. When a ferret is enticing you or another ferret to play, it backs up rapidly across the room, often chattering at the same time. They love to leap, pounce, jump and ambush. They enjoy hiding objects they find on the ground, like socks, and make a hidden stash of these treasures. They are very rewarding and entertaining pets.

## Ferret Facts

Lifespan: 7 – 10 years

Sexual maturity: 4 – 8 months

Age at desexing: 4 – 6 months,

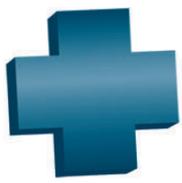
Vaccination against distemper is advised: first dose 12-14 weeks of age then again in 12 months and boosted every 3 years after this.

Ferrets have well-developed anal glands. The glands produce a pungent watery yellow liquid, which the ferret releases when frightened or angry. They can not project fluid over a large distance like a skunk and the smell lasts only a few minutes. As the ferret matures, anal glands are expelled very infrequently. The anal glands are not responsible for the musky odour of ferrets and it is unnecessary to remove the anal glands unless they are diseased. Ferrets have very active sebaceous glands in the skin and they are responsible for producing the overall odour. Ferrets do not have any sweat glands in the skin and are susceptible to over heating (hyperthermia) on hot days.

## Housing/Caging

Ferrets can be maintained either indoors or outdoors. They are relatively easy to maintain as pets, with the same amount of cleaning you would have to do if you had a rabbit or guinea pig. They are inexpensive to feed and are quiet. They sleep 20 hours a day and can adapt easily to your routine if you are out at work all day, being most active when you are home to play with them!

For pet ferrets I recommend outdoor housing in a sheltered weatherproof spot close to the house. Ferrets do not tolerate direct sun for any length of time during the summer months. They are very susceptible to heat stress. In summer when the ambient temperature is 30°C or higher they may need to be brought inside.



They can be maintained in wire cages similar to those used for rabbits and guinea pigs but they should have a solid insulated sleeping area. Two ferrets can be maintained in a cage 60cm x 60cm x 40cm (height) or larger.

Bedding should be provided. They prefer old towels, blankets or windcheaters, to straw or newspaper. Make sure that any bedding material is closely woven, as anything with loose weave is likely to ensnare their toenails. To minimize this risk nails should be trimmed on a regular basis

Ferrets love to sleep in hammocks or slings and different levels or shelves in the cage will increase the play area for the ferrets.

Flooring can be solid or wire. Wire spacing must be close enough together so they do not get their feet caught. If a solid floor is used then cleaning is easier if newspaper is used as well.

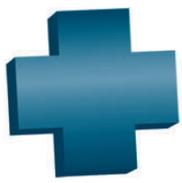
Ferrets can be trained to use a litter box and one should be placed in the cage. The high back type are preferable and you will need to secure it firmly to the wall of the cage as otherwise you will find the ferrets constantly tip it over.

## Play Time

Ferrets are very playful and interactive animals. It is important that they be played with on a regular basis. I advise that you ferret-proof one room of the house so the ferret can have its freedom in this area. Any hole the ferret can enter, and can not be retrieved from must, be blocked off. This includes access to areas under and behind refrigerators or dishwashers etc. Ferrets that have free access to all parts of the house can be injured through falling, being stepped on, being sat on, electrocuting itself, eating foreign objects, or become ill through stress from having interrupted sleep and eating patterns. When the ferret is out to play, it is advisable to have more than one litter tray strategically placed in the corners of the room. Suitable toys for ferrets include boxes, paper bags, plastic shopping bags, and hard plastic dog or cat toys. They also love to run through cardboard or PVC pipes, dryer vent tubing or any other long cylindrical structure. These are great toys and promote exercise.

Ferrets like to burrow into the soft material in couches, chairs and mattresses. This is not only destructive but also may lead to bowel obstructions and death from ingestion of the material. Ferrets also like to chew up sports shoes, stereo speakers, headphones and other items. Reclining chairs are a death trap for ferrets.

Ferrets have long thin bodies with short legs. The spine is very flexible allowing the animal to easily turn 180° in a confined space. The head and the neck are about the same diameter, which makes it hard to keep a collar on them. Harnesses must be used for walking as they generally do not come back when called. Ferrets should be microchipped for identification.



## Sleep Time

Ferrets sleep for about 20 hours. Sometimes they sleep very deeply and can be difficult to wake. The ferret can appear unconscious and unresponsive even when picked up. This can be scary if you are unaware of their sleeping patterns. It is also quite normal for a ferret to shake and shiver when it first wakes up. This does not mean that it is frightened of you; it is a reflex action to increase body heat, as when asleep the ferret's body temperature drops.

## Feeding

Ferrets body weight undergoes seasonal variation, lighter in summer, heavier in winter and can vary as much as 40%. Male (hobs) ferrets are generally heavier than female ferrets (jills). Ferrets are strict carnivores. They require a high quality easily digestible protein because of the very short time (3 – 4 hours) the food spends in the gut before being passed out at the other end! They do not have the appropriate gut flora to digest complex carbohydrates so these should not be a major part of the diet.

Ferrets do not have the ability to digest large amounts of fibre, therefore the diet should be high in good quality meat protein and fat and low in complex carbohydrates and fibre. Due to the ferrets high metabolic rate a dry food diet is preferred over wet food for the bulk of the diet. We recommend a Premium quality kitten food such as Advance as the main diet. For treats avoid sugar. Give dried meat (such as beef jerky) or dried liver, in small amounts. To keep the teeth and gums healthy give raw rabbit (with bone) once or twice weekly or Dentabits® (a cat teeth cleaning product) can also be given.

Ferrets must have fresh water available at all times. They have a relatively high water requirement when compared to the cat or dog. As they love to play in water, the bowl should be secured to the cage or be very large and heavy, as otherwise they will tip it over. In my experience, I have had trouble getting some ferrets to use sipper bottles. Be cautious about leaving a sipper as the only source of water supply in the cage.

## Grooming

The coat undergoes seasonal variation. It is heavier, denser and longer in the winter and lighter, thinner and shorter in the summer. Masking around the face, legs and tail can also change from season to season. Ferrets moult in spring and summer. Ferrets groom themselves in a similar way to cats and therefore require little or no brushing. Ferrets can be bathed using a shampoo that is suitable for cats. Claws should be trimmed about once a month. Ferret claws are meant primarily for digging, but also enable them to climb along carpeted, screen or mesh surfaces.

However as the claws are adapted for burrowing, not climbing, when the ferret climbs it can



easily fall on the way up or walk off the edge when it reaches the top (they are very short sighted!). So it is important to keep nails short and to supervise your ferret when it is loose in the house.

## Reproduction

Both the male and female ferrets have a predictable breeding season. This occurs in the spring – summer period. During breeding season hormones are elevated and the secretions from the glands in the skin increase, resulting in increased body odour (especially in males), oily fur and yellow discolouration of the coat. During the breeding season the male ferrets have an increase in the size of the testicles and the females have an enlarged vulva.

## Desexing

If female ferrets are not going to be used for breeding (and therefore become pregnant) then they must be desexed as the female hormone (oestrogen) causes lethal bone marrow toxicity and she will die. It is advisable to desex male ferrets as it reduces their 'ferret' smell substantially.

## Enjoy your Ferret!

**Ferrets make great pets and we hope you enjoy yours!**

