

Ferrets

Ferrets make great companions. They're friendly, smart, inquisitive, and playful. As burrowing animals, they love to explore, dig, and find nooks to sleep in typically low to the ground. As predators, they are not safe to keep unsupervised around rodents or other small animals. Their playful behaviors are very active. They use their mouths a majority of the time not only to play but also to explore because of their natural history. Ferrets live in social groups so it is best to have multiple ferrets, especially if they have been socialized with other ferrets at a young age. If you are not able to have more than one ferret, they will have more social needs to be met by you with play, interaction, and training.

HOME SWEET HOME

Your ferret should live indoors with you due to the dangers from being outside (predators, poison, and cars). When you're unable to supervise your ferret's activities, it should be confined in a cage.

Wire cages made specifically for ferrets have one-inch by two-inch mesh on the top and sides and one-half-inch and plastic shelves. The cage should be at least two feet wide by three feet long by two feet high for one ferret. 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.

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 on the back. Small cat litter boxes or Rubbermaid containers work also. The best litter to use for ferrets is newspaper pellets or hay pellets because there's no dust or oils and it's excellent at absorbing odors. Avoid using cedar chips, wood shavings, and clay litter as they can cause 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. 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. When being fed a commercial diet, ferrets should have access to food at all times. Use a heavy crockery bowl that can't be tipped over and is easy to clean. Many ferrets do well on a raw diet; research the best option for you and your ferret. Keep fresh water available in a suspended "licker" water bottle or bowl at all times.

For treats you can use some of your ferret's regular diet or an oil supplement such as Ferretone or Vivify. Don't give your ferret any "people food," including fruits, veggies, and sugary treats 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.

Until age four your ferret should visit the veterinarian annually for a general examination and vaccinations against distemper and rabies, after age four every six months. The examination should include a check for internal parasites.

Ferrets frequently have ear mites, which can be treated topically. Ask your veterinarian to show you how to safely keep your ferret's ears cleaned or if you see buildup of dirt in your ferrets' ears. Spaying and neutering not only helps control pet overpopulation, but also helps your ferret live a healthier, happier life.

Ferrets nails grow quickly and need to be trimmed as often as every week. Either small cat clippers or human clippers work fine. To keep your ferret from squirming, put some Vivify or Ferretone on its belly. When clipping, be careful not to cut the red line in the nail (the blood vessel). You may want to ask a 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 descented 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 ferrets bedding and litter box clean, you don't have to bathe them 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 conditioner to use for ferrets.

HANDLING WITH CARE

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

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

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 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. They usually are on a two hour rotation of sleeping, and then awake for no more than an hour before sleeping again.

Ferrets are "nippers" by nature. They will nip for fun, attention, or simply to say, "Here I am." 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. First we would recommend not allowing your ferret to play with your hands but instead only use toys during play. If this doesn't reduce the behavior in a week or so, please seek professional assistance.

Ferrets love to chew, so you'll want to provide your ferret with toys made of hard plastic, hard rubber (like "Kongs") food items that are chewy (i.e. treat sticks, dried non flavored meat jerky for animals). Plastic balls with bells, plastic golf balls, 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, keep it in the cage until it has gone to the bathroom then immediately give it a treat and allow out of cage. When out of the cage your ferret will likely seek out a corner to go to the bathroom, so having litter boxes in multiple corners is also helpful. If you catch your ferret going somewhere it shouldn't, immediately place it in the cage following the same procedure as waking up. 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 as long as they are given time to go through a slow introduction.

RESOURCES

Schilling, Kim. Ferrets for Dummies October 2007

The American Ferret Association, PMB 255, 626-C Admiral Dr., Annapolis, MD 21401; 1-888-FERRET-1;
<http://www.ferret.org/>.