

FERRETS

General Information

Ferrets are domesticated animals that are related to weasels, skunks and otters. It is believed that ferrets were first domesticated by the Egyptians several thousand years ago. Their behaviour and personality lie somewhere between those of cats and dogs.

The average size of a male ferret is 45 cm, and he normally weighs between 1.2 - 2.3 kg. The average female ferret weighs 0.5 - 1.2 kg and is 35 cm long. The lifespan of ferrets tends to range from 6-12 years although 20 year old ferrets have been reported.

There are many advantages of ferret ownership. Most of the time they are easy to maintain. They are small, can be confined in a cage, have inexpensive feeding requirements and are relatively quiet. Ferrets are lively comical animals. They are extremely social, inquisitive and playful with both humans and other ferrets. They are able to be trained e.g. to use kitty litter and walk on a harness. Many ferret owners form a close bond with their pet.

There are some disadvantages of ferret ownership. Ferrets can be a high-maintenance pet, more so than dogs and cats. They need a great deal of your time and attention. Ferrets can be quite mischievous, get underfoot and love to dig up plants and scratch at carpet. Some people do not like the smell of ferrets, especially males. Ferrets can also be expensive pets: young ferrets are accident-prone and can ingest foreign bodies and older ones may suffer from one of many illnesses needing veterinary attention. One other problem with ferrets can be their tendency to nip! Ferrets must be taught not to nip. One way to do this can be by a sharp tap on the nose and an angry no. This discipline will only work if it is immediate and is reinforced.

Ferrets prefer to live in pairs or in small groups so consider that maybe one is not enough! Ferrets can get along with cats and dogs but supervision is recommended. Introductions to existing pets need to be done gradually.

Housing

Ferrets must be kept in a cool area to avoid heatstroke in summer. Ferrets are happy to be housed in a cage but will need to be let out for a few hours each day for socialising and to avoid behavioural problems. Cages for two ferrets should be a minimum of 2 metres square. Most cages are made of metal wire with a solid floor and at least some shade area. Cages are divided into zones of:
Sleeping quarters (a sleeping box containing old towels, blankets, clothing etc.)
Litter tray (cat litter tray kept separate from feed).
Food and water bowls
Use your imagination to make your ferret a great home.

Ferrets in the house

To enable your ferret to spend some time out its cage you will need to "ferret proof" your home. Ferrets can get into anywhere and destroy many items. Block off holes, make cupboards inaccessible, and take care with heaters, air conditioners, bins, toilets and fragile items. Avoid leaving small objects such as bits of rubber that can be ingested and cause a bowel obstruction.

Toys

Ferrets love toys but care needs to be made to ensure they are not small enough to be swallowed or can be broken down into components that could be swallowed. Plastic balls and lengths of flexible pipe as tunnels are good toys.

Feeding

Ferrets are obligate carnivores (they **need** to eat meat). An outline of a feeding plan includes:
DAILY - Fresh water at all times. Feed a combination of meat and dry biscuits. Include fresh raw chopped meats such as lamb, beef, chicken or rabbit and high quality cat biscuits such as lams or Advance. Ferrets under the age of 3-4 years should be fed kitten or growth formula biscuits, but older ferrets are best fed an adult cat version.

WEEKLY - Raw chicken wings or necks to clean teeth. Egg yolk but not egg white.

NEVER - Dairy products, chocolate, fish-based biscuits, cooked bones, salt, dried coconut, dogs hide chews, sausage mince.

Desexing

Desexing is recommended for both male and female ferrets from 4-6 months of age. Desexing is essential for female ferrets that are not being bred from. A female ferret will usually come into season in September and will remain in season until she is desexed, mated or receives veterinary treatment to bring her out of season. Unless she is brought out of season there is a real danger she will die from oestrogen induced anaemia!

Without desexing, males can have a coat colour change (yellowing), and tend to have an unpleasant odour. Entire males can also become quite aggressive and try very hard to escape from their cage in search of a mate.

Vaccination and Health Checks

Ferrets need vaccination at 6-8 weeks of age, 12 weeks of age and 16 weeks of age with a canine c3 vaccine that includes distemper, hepatitis and parvovirus. Your vet needs to be aware of the need to use suitable brands of vaccine and to dilute the dog dose for ferrets. This vaccine is repeated annually. A health exam is done at each vaccination visit. As ferrets get older it is recommended to have blood screening for various common ferret diseases.

Parasites

Gastrointestinal parasites are uncommon in ferrets compared to dogs and cats. They require intestinal worming only once every 6 months. Products such as Felex paste at the cat dose rate can be used. If ferrets can be bitten by mosquitoes they need to be on a heartworm preventative. Heartgard blue chews can be used at half the dose. All ferrets are prone to ear mites. They can be treated with ear drops. Ferrets can also get fleas. A very useful product for ferrets is called "Revolution". This is a topical spot on product used once a month. Although it is not registered for use in ferrets, it appears to be safe with careful dosing in healthy ferrets. It covers against gastrointestinal parasites, heartworm, ear mites and fleas. The usual dose is half a vial of the kitten or puppy pack once a month.

For further information regarding special needs or health issues, please phone to speak with one of our vets.

Disclaimer: This information is of a general nature only, and must not be used as veterinary advice except where directed by your veterinarian. Hall Veterinary Surgery does not warrant the suitability of this information for specific cases. If your animal is unwell or you want to act on this information, please contact us on 6230 2223.