

# Ferret Health Care

All Creatures  
Animal  
Hospital

## Leading Health Problems in Ferrets

Ferrets are increasingly popular as pets in the United States. As such, the need for health care has increased in recent years. The problems encountered in ferrets differ from the common concerns in traditional pets such as dogs and cats. In the US, the population of ferrets is a relatively small gene pool, with the majority of pet ferrets coming from a single source. Preventative care such as spaying and neutering, vaccination, and heartworm prevention has reduced the incidence of some conditions.

In young ferrets, foreign body ingestion remains a leading cause of serious problems. Unlike dogs, many ferrets do not vomit when this occurs. They

may just quit eating. Infections in the stomach, leading to ulcers can occur secondary to stress or concurrent disease.

In mature ferrets, endocrine tumors and lymphatic tumors are common and potentially serious health concerns. The clinical signs vary and often these diseases develop over a long period of time before they exhibit clinical signs. There are a variety of skin tumors that ferrets develop commonly as well. Some of these are benign, but they should be carefully watched.

Geriatric ferrets often develop weakening heart muscles, or cardiomyopathy. This progressive change may eventually lead to congestive heart

failure.

Early detection of problems and prompt care can make treatment of these conditions much more successful than treatment of the seriously affected ferret.



Ferrets cannot be treated like miniature cats! They have special problems.

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### Ferret Care Kit

- *Ivomec for heartworm prevention*
- *Allergroom shampoo*
- *EpiOtic Cleanser*
- *Nail trimmer*
- *Laxatone*
- *CET toothpaste and brush*
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## Vaccination Protocol

Vaccinations can help protect your pet against infectious diseases. The two primary diseases that we vaccinate ferrets against are canine distemper and rabies. Ideally the vaccines should be done on separate days.

### Distemper:

- 6 weeks of age
- 10 weeks of age
- 14 weeks of age
- Annually thereafter

### Rabies:

- 16 weeks of age
- Annually thereafter

# Ferret Nutrition

Ferrets are strict carnivores. Their short digestive tract has very little capacity to process plant material. They require higher protein levels than any other domesticated species. They also require a diet with a very high digestibility. Ferrets also require high fat diets.

A good quality ferret diet will have 34-40% protein from animal sources. Fat content should be about 20%. Digestibility should be around 90% or better.

Diets specifically formulated for ferrets are increasingly available. Whenever possible these diets should be used. Premium brand kitten diets may be

used when ferret diets are not available.

Occasionally ferrets will have dry, brittle coats. The addition of additional fatty acids may benefit these ferrets. Linatone or Ferretone can be used for this purpose.

Ferrets should be fed free choice. Although a ferret may carry a large amount of fat, obesity as a clinically relevant disorder is extremely rare in ferrets. High fiber diets intended for weight loss in cats should not be used in ferrets.



Ferret diets are increasingly available.

A high quality feline diet can be used if a ferret diet is not available.

# Grooming and Hygiene

Ferrets' skin secretes a substantial amount of oil. This oil is what accounts for the musty odor that is a characteristic of ferrets. The amount and the potency of the skin oils are much less in neutered ferrets than in sexually intact ferrets. However, periodic bathing can further reduce the odor of these pets.

Baths should be no more frequent than once monthly unless a specific skin condition is being treated.

Likewise, ear wax is abundantly pro-

*"Baths should be no more frequent than once monthly unless a specific skin condition is being treated."*

duced. While bacterial and yeast ear infections are uncommon, wax buildup can impact the ear canal. Monthly cleansing with ear solution is advis-

able.

Ferret nails grow fast and sharp. Fortunately they are very easy to trim. The nails are clear, allowing easy visualization of the quick. As long as the quick is avoided, nail trimming is safe and painless.

To keep the teeth clean, ferrets should have their teeth brushed every 1-3 days. Alternately, feline dental chews can be used.

# Parasite Prevention

In areas where heartworms are a problem, ferrets should receive protection from this deadly disease. In ferrets, heartworm is difficult both to detect and to treat. Prevention, however is very simple. Two to three drops of medication once monthly effectively prevents heartworms from developing into the dangerous life stages.

Fleas can be a problem in ferrets if dogs

or cats are around.

**Revolution:**

1/2 feline dose monthly

**Ivermectin:**

2 drops once monthly for ferrets under 1 kg.

3 drops once monthly for ferrets over 1 kg.



Revolution is effective for preventing both fleas and heartworms.

## Adrenal Disease

An alarming percentage of pet ferrets in the U.S. suffer from endocrine disorders. The most common of these in our practice is adrenal endocrinopathy. The causes of this disorder is unknown. Contributing factors may include genetics, spaying/neutering, especially at a young age, and consistently long light cycles.

In many cases, this disease is not life-threatening, but serious complications sometimes occur. As with most diseases, early detection will allow treatment when it has the best chance of success. Early signs may include thinning hair coat, swollen vulva, urinary straining, or behavior changes.

There are means of detecting this disease early. One involves having blood levels of sex steroids measured. A blood sample is sent to University of Tennessee for this test. The other way is by performing an abdominal ultrasound on the ferret. This will determine if an adrenal gland is enlarged, but will also examine other abdominal organs. This is an excellent way to assess health in ferrets. Our recommendation is to have this done annually after the age of three.

Treatment options can be discussed if problems are detected.



Adrenal disease is the most common cause of hair loss.

## Insulinoma

The other common endocrine disease of ferrets is insulinoma. These are small tumors in the pancreas that secrete excessive levels of insulin. As a result, the blood glucose can become dangerously low.

Affected ferrets often have very slow, insidious onset of signs that can go undetected for a long time. They may just lose weight or become a little more sluggish. These signs are often mistaken for simple aging.

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Early recognition and treatment can result in tremendous improvement in both the duration and quality of life for affected ferrets.

Fasting blood glucose levels can be used to screen for this disease. A maximum of 4-6 hours of fasting is required. If the blood glucose is low, the level of insulin can be checked to confirm the disease.

If confirmed, our doctors can discuss treatment options.

## Lymphoma

One of the most common cancers of ferrets is lymphoma or lymphosarcoma. This is a cancer of the lymphatic cells of the body. These cells reside in the lymph nodes, the spleen, the thymus, the bone marrow, and the blood, as well as most other tissues of the body. Cancer of this type is considered “systemic” since so many areas are involved.

Because of the wide variety of locations

that are affected clinical signs vary considerably.

Physical examination, blood tests, x-rays, or ultrasound can all give results that may make us suspicious of lymphoma. Only a cytology or a biopsy can confirm the diagnosis however.

Unlike many types of cancer, surgical removal of a primary mass is unlikely to benefit a patient with lymphoma,

other than in determining the diagnosis. It is almost assuredly present in multiple tissues at the time of diagnosis. Lymphoma, however, is often responsive to chemotherapy, especially if started early in the course of the disease. While cures are uncommon, treatment can give better quality of life, and increase survival time.

# All Creatures Animal Hospital

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**Look for us on the Web:  
[www.allcreaturesAH.com](http://www.allcreaturesAH.com)**

*Quality medicine in a caring environment.*



## ***Our Mission***

*All Creatures Animal Hospital is dedicated to providing progressive medicine in a caring environment for pets of all species. Through preventative medicine, client education, professional development of our staff, and advanced medical and surgical techniques, we hope to foster a strong and lasting bond with clients and their pets.*

## Optimizing Geriatric Ferret Health

While the life expectancy of ferrets is 7-9 years, the onset of some of the common aging disorders can occur as young as 3 years. For this reason, we recommend increased monitoring starting at this age. The protocol listed below has been devised to best detect common clinical syndromes in pet ferrets. Of course it can be tailored to meet the needs of the individual ferret. The protocol involves two annual visits.

### **Visit 1:**

- Review of Clinical History
- Physical Examination
- Distemper Vaccination
- Refill Heartworm Preventative

### **Visit 2:**

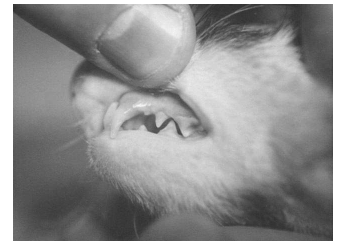
- Review of Clinical History
- Physical Examination
- Complete Blood Count
- Mini Chemistry Panel
- Whole Body Radiographs
- Abdominal Ultrasound
- Cardiac Ultrasound
- Rabies Vaccination

For Visit 2, ferrets should be fasted for 4 hours. The visit will take approximately 90 minutes. Following the completion of the examination and workup, the results will be discussed with you and any recommendations made.

### **Optional**

- Dental Prophylaxis

Included is a complete scaling, periodontal examination, and polishing of the teeth. Dental procedures require anesthesia, so your pet will need to be here for a few hours for recovery.



Dental care can prevent tooth loss and gum pain.