

Ferrets are part of the Mustelid or weasel family. They are closely related to otters, minks and skunks. Over many years they have been domesticated and are now becoming an increasingly common household pet. Ferrets make unique pets that will keep you entertained and amused with their quirky behaviours. This guide will give you all the information to help care for them properly.



LIFE SPAN: 5-11 years

ADULT SIZE

- Females: 500g-1kg
- Males: 1-2kg

WEANING: 6-8 weeks

SEXUAL MATURITY: 4-8 months

YOUNG: kits

FEMALES: jills

Diet

Ferrets are obligate carnivores, that is they obtain all their nutritional requirements from meat and lack the ability to properly digest plants. The majority of the diet should comprise of premium ferret biscuits such as the Vetafarm Origins ferret kibble. This should ideally be supplemented with ethically killed, thawed whole prey items such as day old chicks, rodents, rabbits or quails. These items can be sourced from reptile stores or pet stores. An alternative to whole prey items is raw meaty bones, such as chicken necks.

Ferrets have a very fast metabolism and are therefore prone to low blood sugar if food is withheld, for this reason it is very important to not withhold food for more than 3 or 4 hours. Dry food such as ferret biscuits can be left out all day. Cooked meat and minced meat can also be fed as a treat but should not compromise a significant part of their diet. Cow milk and most other human foods should be avoided.

Housing

The enclosure should be made out of a sturdy easy to clean material such as stainless steel and should be well ventilated. Make sure the cage bars are narrow enough that they cannot squeeze their slim bodies through, as ferrets are the ultimate escape artists! Ferrets will enjoy having multiple levels in their enclosure. Hammocks, comfortable blankets, toys and tunnels should be included in their enclosure. They love to hide in boxes and burrow under towels and blankets. Ferrets are easily litter trained and the enclosure should contain at least one litter tray. Clumping or recycled paper litter can be used. Fresh food and water should always be available. Bowls should be sturdy eg ceramic to prevent them being knocked over.

Ferret enclosures should preferably be kept indoors to protect them from harsh weather and from escaping. Ferrets can be kept outdoors but must be sheltered from winds, heat and rain. In very high or low temperatures ferrets should be brought indoors. If you are housing your ferret indoors this certainly does not mean that your ferret cannot go outside. Many ferret owners will build their ferrets an outdoor run/maze/tunnel system for them to enjoy which allows them to freely exercise whilst being safe from any predators or from getting out. Ferrets can also be trained to walk on a harness.

Socialisation

Ferrets are friendly and interactive pets that will want to spend time with their human companions. It is important to interact with and handle your ferret daily to get them accustomed to human handling. Many ferrets will bite when they are younger, it is important to discourage this habit early on. This can be accomplished with a firm "NO" and time out (including ignoring your ferret) for half an hour or so each time it happens, as well as positively reinforcing desirable behavior (eg interactions when the ferret is not biting) with praise, affection and food treats.

Ferrets will usually get along well with one or more ferret companions. If you are keeping multiple ferrets it is recommended that they be sterilised to prevent unwanted confrontation and litters!

Ferrets can get along with other pets such as dogs and cats but should never be left unsupervised. Ferrets should not be housed with any animals other than ferrets. Ferrets are typically particularly aggressive towards rabbits and rodents and should not be housed with these species or allowed to interact with these species.

Health Care

Ferrets are susceptible to canine distemper virus, which is usually fatal if contracted and hence they should be vaccinated for canine distemper virus initially at 8-10 weeks of age and again at 12-16 weeks old and then once yearly thereafter. Ferrets are also susceptible to a range of parasites, especially heartworm, which can cause serious and potentially fatal heart failure. Parasites including heartworm can be prevented by using a commercial spot-on product such as Advocate or Revolution (for kittens/puppies) monthly. We also recommend microchipping your ferret. Nail clips may need to be performed every couple months depending on the surfaces ferrets are on at home and if they have provision to scratching posts/boards. This can be performed by your veterinarian and they can also guide you as to how to clip nails at home.

It is strongly recommended that ferrets are desexed to prevent health conditions and unwanted litters. Desexing can also reduce aggression and the musky ferret odour. Female ferrets especially should be desexed (or brought out of heat by another method) by the time of their first heat (6-8 months old) otherwise many will suffer a serious and potentially fatal anaemia (loss of red blood cells) due to high and persistent circulating oestrogen.

There are two options for desexing ferrets, surgical and chemical. Surgical desexing involves day surgery to remove the entire reproductive tract. The benefit of this is that only one surgery is required and the process is complete. Surgical desexing, especially at a young age, may however predispose to adrenal disease later in life. The chemical desexing option involves placing an implant under the skin. This will render the ferret infertile for 12-30 months and will also protect against adrenal disease. The process often requires a very short anaesthetic but is otherwise very simple. The implant does need to be repeated once a year to continue to be effective. Another option is to have the ferret surgically desexed as well as placing implants once a year to prevent adrenal disease.

Your veterinarian can go through the pros and cons of both options more extensively in consultation.

Pet ferrets should visit a veterinarian every 6-12 months for a general health check.

Enrichment

Although ferrets may spend up to 70% of their day sleeping and resting, exercise and play are forms of mental and physical enrichment that are very important for keeping ferrets happy and healthy. Regardless of whether it is indoors or outdoors, ferrets should be allowed to come out of their cage for supervised play time for at least a couple hours a day. Supervision is essential as aforementioned ferrets are natural escape artists. They are also very curious and will not hesitate to ingest items, especially those made of foam or rubber lying around, which can cause serious issues.

Ferrets love to run and chase, they enjoy playing in tunnels and love to play with many of the sorts of toys that cats enjoy- balls, bells, fluffy toys, mobile toys etc. They are curious and intelligent and you will love watching their personalities unfold during playtime.



Enrichment Ideas

- Cat toys eg balls, toy mice
- Sand pit to dig in
- Ball pits – you can use a large plastic tub or clam pool and fill with plastic balls
- Squeaky toys
- Chasey – your ferret will love to chase you around the house and for you to chase them back
- Kong toy filled with meaty chunks, kibble, mince meat or even an egg yolk to keep them occupied
- Going for a walk on the harness
- Create an enclosed tunnel or maze system for your ferret to run around in

Never leave your ferret unsupervised with new toys or with any toys that have small parts that could be ingested