

National Association of State Public Health Veterinarians
Policy Brief: Ownership of ferrets as pets
February 3, 2020

I. Description of problem to be addressed

European ferrets (*Mustela putorius*) that are kept as house pets can inflict severe injuries on infants and young children.¹⁻⁷ Such injuries often involve the face and head and are characterized by multiple puncture wounds, lacerations, and/or tissue loss.^{1,2,4-6} Many reported attacks have been unprovoked,^{1,2,4,5} with some occurring while infants were restrained in baby seats or asleep in their cribs.^{1,2,4-6} Ferrets are adept at escaping from their cages,² and multiple reported attacks have occurred as a result of such escapes.^{2,5,6} A review of 452 ferret attacks occurring in 18 US states and London, England during 1978–1987 found that 64 (14%) were unprovoked attacks on infants and children younger than 4 years, including one fatality.² Ferret bites can transmit rabies¹⁻⁵ and mycobacterial infections^{8,9} and are a theoretical mechanism of transmission for other bacterial wound infections.¹⁰ Some authors have asserted that ferrets should not be kept as pets in households where infants or young children are present^{1,5} or should not be kept as pets at all.^{2,3} The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that ferrets not be kept as pets in homes with children younger than 5 years.¹¹ The American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Infectious Diseases recommends that ferrets be kept out of households that contain children younger than 5 years.¹²

II. Justification of importance to CSTE membership

In 1987, the Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists (CSTE) approved a position statement 1) recommending that CDC develop a ferret bite surveillance system, and 2) supporting states taking appropriate action to prohibit possession of ferrets.¹³ In 1994, CSTE and the National Association of State Public Health Veterinarians (NASPHV) jointly approved a position statement warning against keeping ferrets as pets because of the potential for them to inflict serious injuries to infants and young children and because there was a lack of data on the pathogenesis of rabies in ferrets. This position statement was amended in 2000 to recognize that there was adequate scientific evidence to recommend that rabies post-exposure management of ferrets be identical to that for dogs and cats; however, the position statement explicitly states that the issue of injuries to infants and young children has not changed and the recommendations pertaining to this issue should remain.¹⁴

Since the revision of the position statement in 2000, little has been added to the scientific literature on ferret bites. A 2008 article described a case report of a severe unprovoked ferret attack on a six-week-old infant⁶ and a 2013 article described a case report of mycobacterial infection in an immunocompromised adult following a ferret bite.⁹ During 2006–2016, the percentage of US households owning ferrets decreased from 0.4% to 0.3%, and the estimated population of pet ferrets in the US decreased from 1,060,000 to 500,801;¹⁵ the decreasing popularity of ferrets as pets may partly explain the limited number of recent bite reports in the literature. No new information has been published since 2000 that would allow NASPHV to make specific recommendations for how to prevent unprovoked attacks on infants and young children in households where ferrets are present.

III. Position on policy or issue

NASPHV recommends that ferrets be kept out of households that contain infants or children younger than 5 years.

Recommendations for rabies vaccination of ferrets and for management of ferrets that have bitten people may be found in NASPHV's Compendium of Animal Rabies Prevention and Control.¹⁶

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