

# Caring for Ferrets

- Ferrets are playful, intelligent, curious, and affectionate, often bonding closely with their owners.
- Ferrets require daily play and social interaction, free access to fresh water and a meat-based diet, and regular veterinary care.
- Ferrets should be neutered/spayed and descented by 5 to 6 weeks of age to prevent certain illnesses and reduce odor and aggression.
- Ferrets are prohibited from being kept as pets in some cities and states. Check with your local fish and game or wildlife department before obtaining a ferret.

## Biological Facts

- The scientific name of the domestic ferret is *Mustela putorius furo*.
- Ferrets are descended from the European polecat and are native to most European countries.
- The average life span of a ferret is 6 to 10 years.
- The average adult weight is 2.5 lb (1.2 kg) for females and 4 lb (2 kg) for males.

## Behavior

Ferrets are quiet, friendly, curious, and playful. They can be trained to come to an owner's call or a specific sound, such as the squeak of a toy.

Because of their curious nature, they like to explore and get into tight spaces. Owners should create a ferret-proof area for play; all openings larger than 1 inch in walls, floors, ductwork, and appliances should be sealed with wire mesh rather than tape, which ferrets can remove. Ferrets also like to chew on soft or plastic objects, such as foam, pencil erasers, and rubber bands, all of which can cause choking or intestinal blockage. To prevent injuries and ingestion of harmful objects or substances, ferrets require constant supervision when out of their cage. To satisfy the ferret's tunneling instinct, owners can provide blankets or rugs in the ferret's safe area(s).

Ferrets can be litterbox trained. It is normal for ferrets to drag their hindquarters on the floor after urinating or defecating.

Nipping is a natural play behavior of ferrets. If a ferret nips, he or she should be returned to the cage for a brief time out. The ferret will eventually learn that nipping is not appropriate. Hitting or otherwise reprimanding the ferret is not recommended.

Ferrets sleep up to 18 hours a day and are most active in the early morning and evening. It is normal for them to shake and shiver when they awake.

## Diet

Food and fresh water should be available to ferrets at all times. To ensure that ferrets receive proper nutrition, it is best to feed a dry commercial ferret food; high-quality cat or kitten food can also be fed. Ferrets are strict carnivores, meaning that they must eat a meat-based diet. Ferrets should not be fed dairy products, fruits, vegetables, or other foods high in fiber, carbohydrates, or sugar.

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## Exercise

Ferrets require daily play and interaction. To remain healthy, ferrets need at least 2 to 4 hours of activity outside their cage every day. The door of the cage should be left open for access to food, water, and the litterbox.

## Housing

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Because ferrets are "escape artists," they should be kept in a cage specifically designed for them. A

## Caring for Your New Pet

single- or multi-level, open-wire ferret cage with a solid floor is recommended. Owners should ensure that the cage door is secure. The cage should be kept in a quiet area where the temperature is 65°F to 75°F (18°C to 24°C).

The litterbox should be filled with aspen shavings or litter made of recycled newspaper products. Cedar and pine shavings should not be used because they may irritate a ferret's respiratory tract. Clay or clumping cat litter should not be used because ferrets may eat it. The litterbox should be cleaned daily.

Ferrets often tip over food and water bowls if they aren't very stable or attached to the side of the cage.

A towel, hammock, blanket, or old shirt can be used for bedding. Tattered items should not be used because they may cause strangulation. Newspaper or wood chips should not be used because they can harbor bacteria or create dust that may irritate a ferret's respiratory tract. To reduce the musky odor of ferrets, bedding should be washed frequently.

Ferrets should have sturdy toys without small parts that can be chewed and swallowed. Toys made of foam rubber, latex, or plastic should be avoided because they might cause choking or intestinal blockage.

### Common Medical Disorders

- Adrenal gland disease—disease of the adrenal glands, which primarily release stress hormones and are located near the kidneys
- Insulinoma—a usually benign tumor of the pancreas

- Lymphoma—a usually malignant tumor of the lymph nodes and lymphatic system
- Flea infestation
- Ear mite infestation
- Stomach ulceration—loss of surface tissue of the inner wall of the stomach
- Foreign body ingestion—swallowing non-food objects that can cause choking or intestinal blockage
- Intestinal parasites, such as *Giardia* and *Coccidia* organisms

### Preventive Care

- Neutering/spaying and descenting by 5 to 6 weeks of age to prevent certain illnesses and reduce odor and aggression
- Regular physical examinations
- Regular vaccinations for canine distemper and rabies
- Regular fecal examination for parasites
- Examination for ear mites as recommended by your veterinarian
- Year-round use of heartworm and flea preventives
- Dental cleaning and polishing as recommended by your veterinarian
- Routine blood tests and measurement of fasting blood sugar level as recommended by your veterinarian
- Trimming of toenails as needed