

# Ferret Care

## **NATURAL HISTORY**

Domestic ferrets were initially used as hunting animals for the control of wild or native rabbits and rodents. Ferrets were introduced as domestic pets in North America nearly 300 years ago. Ferrets are most commonly represented in four coat variations; sable, albino, cinnamon, and Shetland sable.

## **SPECIAL CHARACTERISTICS**

### **Longevity**

5-8 years

### **Age at Maturity**

4-8 months (first spring after birth)

### **Gestation**

41-42 days

### **Litter size**

1-10 kits (average 8)

### **Birth Weight**

8-10g

### **Weaning Age**

6-8 weeks

### **Body Temperature**

100°F-104°F

### **Temperament**

Ferrets are lively, comical pets. Ferrets are capable of making a variety of noises, including a low-pitched mumbling when roaming around a room, chuckling and hissing when happy and playing, and a loud squeal or scream when fighting with another ferret, in pain, or frightened. Ferrets are also very active when they are awake. They entice one to play by moving quickly across a room while chattering and hissing. They also like to leap and jump when playing. Ferrets sleep 70-75% and play the other 25-30%

## **CAPTIVE CARE REQUIREMENTS**

### **Housing**

Up to two ferrets can easily be maintained in a large cage no smaller than 24" long x 24" wide x 18" in height. Custom-built wooden cages can be constructed, but the lower third of the walls and the floor should be covered with a non-absorbable, easy to clean surface. Tiles and linoleum make good protectants and are easy to clean and disinfect.

Ferrets can be maintained either indoors or outdoors. If kept outdoors a large shade covering should be provided as protection from extreme heat and cold. In addition a well-insulated nest house should be available at all times. Ferrets do not tolerate temperatures over 90F or high humidity, and should be brought indoors. For temperatures below 20F, a heated shelter should be provided.

A sleeping enclosure should always be provided in your ferret's cage, and should be dark and enclosed. Ferrets love sleep and play areas such as slings, hammocks, and shelves. Towels, old shirts, and cloth hats can also be used as bedding. Be sure all cage furniture is securely attached to the cage and that all sleeping materials are routinely cleaned.

### **Litter Box**

Ferrets are easily trained to use a litter box. However, they have a short digestive transit time, and may not always make it back to the cage to use the litter box if it is not close by. It is recommended to have several litter boxes available in various rooms of the house for use when your ferret is not caged. Be sure you provide the corner litter boxes, it is almost certain your ferret will retreat to a corner to do its deed! Different types of litter are available such as recycled newspaper products and shredded newspaper.

### **Water**

Water should always be available in either a sipper bottle or a heavy crock-type bowl. Ferrets love to play in water and should not be able to overturn their water bowl. Water should be replaced daily. Water bottles and bowls should be cleaned with soapy water followed by bleach at least once a week. Be sure the bottle and/or bowl are rinsed free of all bleach before refilling and placing back into the cage.

### **Diet**

Ferrets are strict carnivores. Their gastrointestinal transit time is 3-4 hours therefore they should have easy to digest high-quality proteins and fats. It is very important to avoid high carbohydrate and high fiber foods due to the absence of intestinal flora to break them down. A sign of a fat deficient diet is a dry and dull coat.

A dry-based food may reduce the incidence of dental calculi build up. A commercial food made especially for ferrets should be provided. There are a number of quality ferret diets available now. Do not feed kitten, cat or dog food.

### **Treats**

Avoid sweet treats. Avoid high fiber goods such as fruits and vegetables.

### **Bathing**

Ferrets do not require routine bathing. Owners bathe their ferrets to either reduce the odor or minimize allergic reactions to the ferret dander or fur. Frequent bathing may strip the skin of essential oils and produce itchy or dry skin. Recommended bathing is once per month, if necessary.

### **Toys**

Toys should not include any latex rubber toys intended for dogs or cats. Paper bags, cloth toys or hard plastic/metal toys are generally safe and fun toys. Ferrets love to run through cylindrical objects like polyvinyl chloride pipe (PVC), large mailing tubes, and dryer vent tubing. Ferrets should not be left unattended while playing with toys.

### **Exercise**

If your ferret is allowed out of its cage to roam around the house, be sure to "ferret proof" your home. Anywhere a ferret's head can go, its body can follow. All holes to the outside (such as dryer vents) or any areas the ferret cannot be retrieved should be blocked off. Ferrets love to burrow into soft foam rubber of furniture and mattresses. Cover the bottom

of couches, chairs, and mattresses. This will prevent destruction of furniture and the possibility of a gastrointestinal obstruction. Also, remove reclining chairs, which have a high incident of ferret deaths.

### **Health Care**

Ferrets should visit the veterinarian at least once a year for a thorough health examination and vaccinations. Ferrets require canine distemper and rabies vaccines and often need dental and ear cleanings. Ferrets are prone to many diseases, especially when they become middle-aged and over, so more frequent trips to the veterinarian may be necessary to ensure that your ferret stays as healthy as possible. We also recommend bloodwork to help evaluate their kidneys, liver and pancreas as they get older.