

## Ferret

Are you considering a ferret as a companion? Here is some information to get you started.

Ferrets are high maintenance pets. After initial startup costs, expect to spend approximately \$500-700 each year for a single, healthy ferret. The average lifespan for a ferret is 7-10 years. Ferrets need the opportunity to socialize and exercise outside of their cage for at least 4 hours every day. Lastly, their diet and housing require daily maintenance. Follow these guidelines for basic ferret husbandry to ensure your pet is a happy and healthy member of your family!



### Basic Care

#### Housing

The minimum recommended cage size is 36" L x 24" W x 36" H which provides room for food, water, a litter box, and space to run, climb, play, and hide. Cage bottoms and levels should be solid rather than wire to prevent painful foot ulcers. To keep your ferret engaged and happy, provide plenty of environmental enrichment, such as hammocks, pillowcases, cardboard boxes, paper bags, stuffed toys, hard plastic toys and balls, and tunnels. Avoid soft plastic or rubber toys, as pieces may be ingested. Every ferret has a different personality and a different way of playing, so experiment with different toys and activities in and outside the cage!

#### Food & Water

Ferrets are carnivores, and in the wild, they eat whole small mammals, so they require a very specialized diet in captivity. Simply feeding raw meat would be dangerous, as they need the nutrients from eating small prey whole - bones and all! You can find appropriate ferret food at most pet stores. Be sure to provide unlimited amounts of fresh food. In general, they self-regulate very well and won't become obese as long as they have an opportunity for adequate exercise.

**Water:** Use either a bowl or water bottle and provide fresh water daily. Monitor the consumption to ensure that your pet gets enough fresh water to stay hydrated.

#### Bedding

The bottom of a ferret's cage can be covered with several layers of fleece, towels or blankets, which the ferrets will burrow into.

#### Litter Training

Ferrets are easily litter trained. A litter box should be fixed in a place in the area the ferret would naturally soil (usually a corner). Dust-free, pelleted recycled newspaper litter is the safest and wisest choice.

## Grooming

- Many people bathe their ferrets regularly to help alleviate the natural musk smell. However, it's not advisable to bathe them any more than a couple times a year, as it will disturb their natural oils and cause skin irritation.
- Nails should be clipped about every 2 months. If they aren't kept trimmed, they can break or impair mobility, both painful to the ferret.
- Ferrets can be brushed regularly to reduce shedding in the home and ingestion of fur during self-cleaning.
- A ferret's ears should be cleaned about once a month to prevent the build-up of earwax, as well as checked for infestation of ear mites.

## Allergies?

If you or a member of your household suffers from allergies, you might be allergic to a ferret. If you think you might be affected, spend some time around the species prior to adopting.

## Health Care

### Veterinary Care & Spay/Neuter

Most ferrets bred commercially in Canada or the United States are spayed or neutered and descented prior to being sold. Because most ferrets come from commercial breeders, there is a good chance that your ferret is already spayed or neutered. These ferrets can be identified by tattoo that breeders place in their ears. Some ferrets from private breeders may be intact. Intact ferrets who come through the Humane Society may not be spayed or neutered. If you have adopted an intact ferret from us, we will provide additional medical information for you in a separate information sheet.

Ferrets should be vaccinated against 2 viruses: Rabies and Canine Distemper. The Rabies vaccine will be provided by the Humane Society in all ferrets over 12 weeks of age. However, your ferret will still need to be vaccinated against distemper, which requires an initial series of three injections. It is a good idea to find a ferret-savvy veterinarian in your area before adopting.

### Common Medical Concerns:

Approximately 40% of the ferrets will develop tumours in their adrenal glands. This has been linked to genetics as well as early spay/neuter surgeries. Early symptoms of adrenal disease in ferrets include hair loss, itching, and enlarged genitalia. In males, difficulty in urinating can be another sign. If left untreated, ferrets can lose muscle mass and become weak/lethargic. This disease is treatable with hormonal therapy or surgery. Ferrets are also predisposed to heart disease and a variety of gastrointestinal concerns. They are susceptible to a few infectious causes of diarrhea, as well as intestinal blockages due to their propensity to eat things that they shouldn't. If you notice any changes in your ferret's elimination or food

intake, you should consult your veterinarian immediately. A good diet and plenty of daily exercise and enrichment will help maintain good health and long life.

## **Ferret Behaviour**

### **Psychology & Training**

Ferrets are extremely energetic and playful creatures by nature. They are crepuscular, meaning they are most active at dawn and dusk and generally sleep 14-18 hours a day. Ferrets can play rough and must be taught not to nip.

The best way to train a ferret is to reward good behaviours and gentle play. Punishment is generally not an effective training tool, so avoid hitting, yelling at, or tapping the nose of your ferret. The most important thing to keep your pet happy and healthy is to spend time with him/her every day and provide plenty of toys inside and outside the cage. It is important to socialize and train your ferret properly: a fearful or poorly socialized ferret can become aggressive.

### **One or Two?**

Ferrets are naturally social animals and can form very strong bonds with each other, so housing multiple ferrets together is recommended. Once bonds are formed, they should not be broken, as separation can cause depression. It is possible to introduce two unfamiliar ferrets - but do your research first! Bonding two ferrets can be tricky and must be approached with caution.

### **Handling**

Ferrets have extremely flexible spines that allow for an unbelievable range of motion. Because of this, they are fairly squirmy and must be handled with care. Be sure to hold them gently but securely; dropping or stepping on a ferret can cause serious injury.

### **How do ferrets see the world?**

Ferrets have poor vision but are excellent at detecting movement. They see best in low-light conditions, ideal for their natural hunting at dawn and dusk. Ferrets have extremely keen senses of smell and hearing, which they rely on heavily for navigation, communication, and hunting.

### **Origins**

Domestic ferrets are the descendants of the European polecat, who live throughout Europe, and were domesticated around 2500 years ago for the purpose of "ferreting," or hunting rabbits. This activity became increasingly popular in 19th century Europe. Ferrets did not become popular as pets in North America until the 1980s. Wild polecats are found in woodlands, farmlands and wetlands. They often make dens in stream banks or under tree roots. Almost entirely carnivorous, they feed mainly on small mammals. They have a home range of about one square kilometer. Unlike their polecat ancestors who live solitary lives, domestic ferrets are happy to live in social groups.

### **Understanding Ferret Vocalizations**

- Dooking or Chuckling: Excited, playful, happy.
- Hissing: Annoyed. Can be a warning before a bite.
- Squeaking: Can be a natural part of play, but can also indicate the ferret is upset.
- Whining: Discomfort or pain.
- Screaming: Extreme pain or fear.