



## Ferrets – feeding, husbandry and veterinary care

Ferrets make fantastic pets. They are inquisitive, mischievous and each have their own unique personality. New ferret owners can often find it very daunting to understand what foods to feed and what veterinary care is required. This care sheet is designed to make this task less daunting.

### Basic Information:

Ferrets (*Mustela putorius furo*) are a member of the Mustelid family and are related to otters and weasels. They generally live for an average of 5-8 years however some can live longer. There are a number of different coat colour variations available.

### Choosing a healthy ferret:

There are many different places where you can purchase your ferret. In Western Australia a good place to start is the Western Australian Ferret and Ferreting Society. There are many reputable ferret breeders that are members of this society and are more than willing to help new ferret owners out.

Regardless of where you choose to buy your ferret from it is important that you give them a thorough examination before purchasing. Ferrets should have a healthy gleaming coat, clear bright eyes, pink and moist gum colour, nice clean teeth, and have well formed faeces. If any problems are identified it may be best to consider having a ferret vet checkup before purchasing your ferret.



### General Keeping Recommendations:

Ferrets are curious creatures that love to explore new environments. They are also escape artists hence it is vital that their cage, and any area that they have access to, is made to be escape proof.

The general rule for ferret housing is to provide the largest cage that is possible in any given situation. Ferrets can be kept either outside or inside as long as appropriate housing and protection from the weather is provided. They need to have a large space to run and play as well as having a cosy bedroom to sleep in. Ferrets generally sleep for up to 70% of the day and for this reason it is important that their bedroom is filled with lots of blankets so that they can burrow, tunnel and hide. It is also a good idea to provide cardboard or plastic boxes or tubing to allow them to hide and be in the dark if they want to.

Regardless of the caging provided it is very important that your ferret is let out for supervised “play time” as often as possible. As ferrets are very inquisitive it is important that they are supervised at all times to ensure they don’t chew on or ingest anything that they shouldn’t. Please also be very careful if you have any reclining chairs or couches as ferrets love to hide and play in and under these.





Ferrets do not tolerate hot temperatures very well and are prone to heat stress. They generally prefer temperatures around the low 20C's however each ferret is slightly different. For this reason it is very important that your ferret is kept cool on warmer days. Ways to keep your ferret cool include air conditioning, fans, frozen water bottles, ice blocks in their water bowl and misting with water (if they will tolerate it!).

Ferrets can often be trained to use a litter box just like a cat. Most ferrets will instinctively go to the toilet in the corner of the room or cage that they are in and this is often a good place to put a litter tray. If your ferret is toileting in areas you would prefer them not to then gently move them into their litter box to encourage them to toilet there. This may need to be repeated a few times before they get the hang of it. A litter box is needed in each room that your ferret has access to.

Ferrets can be taught to perform tricks and will often learn quickly, especially if there is food involved. A good trick to start with is to teach them to roll over, make sure you reward them each time that they do this correctly so that the trick is positively reinforced.



### **How do I teach my ferret not to bite?**

Ferrets naturally use their mouths to communicate and play with their fellow ferrets. This can become a problem when they start using this behaviour on their owners! Ferrets have sharp teeth and their bites can certainly hurt!

It is important that your ferret is trained not to bite as soon as possible. We recommend starting with gentle methods of 'punishment' when they do attempt to bite. A good starting point is to loudly and sharply yell "NO!". Some ferret owners find that a short 'hiss' can work better than the word "NO" in some cases. For those really stubborn ferrets that keep continuing to try to bite it is often necessary to scruff them by their neck at the same time as making a loud noise as aforementioned.

### **Can my ferret be kept with other pets?**

We strongly recommended to NOT mix your ferret with any other small mammals (ie rabbits, guinea pigs, rats or mice) that you have. Some ferrets can be trained to get along well with some dogs and cats if raised together or slowly introduced.

### **What to feed my ferret?**

Ferrets are carnivores meaning that the majority of their diet needs to be made up of meat and animal products. They have a very high metabolic rate and need to have access to food and fresh water at all times. It is often advisable to use heavy food and water bowls to prevent them from tipping them over.





There are some commercially available ferret specific dry food diets (Ile Vetafarm® Ferret Origins) that are available in Australia. We recommend these as your ferret's primary diet. If these diets are unobtainable then you can also feed a premium brand kitten food. Examples of these premium foods include Hill's Science Diet Kitten® or Royal Canin Kitten® dry food. Please do not feed lower quality or "supermarket" kitten food as these products often do not provide adequate nutrition for ferrets. If the aforementioned recommended products are not available then please ensure that the commercial dry food you are feeding has an animal based protein content of 32-40%, a fat content of around 20% and a fibre content of <3%. High digestibility is also desirable.

Some owners prefer to feed a more natural diet of 'whole prey' items, for example rodents or rabbits that have been killed, frozen and then thawed. These are available from a range of reptile shops.

If electing to feed a commercial dry food mix then it is important that ferrets are also offered small pieces of raw meaty bone one to two times per week. This helps to prevent dental disease, which ferrets are prone to. It is important to make sure that your ferrets are eating the meat shortly after giving it to them and not 'storing it' for later (which puts the meat at risk of 'going off').

Most ferrets will also love many fruits and vegetables however they are not designed to digest these well and hence we recommend to use these as a very occasional treat only or not at all. Small pieces of meat are a better alternative for treats.



### **What do I need to take my ferret to the vet for?**

Ferrets require regular veterinary care and check ups. The following is a summary of what we recommend.

### **Primary Vaccination Course**

Ferrets are susceptible to canine distemper virus, if contracted it is fatal in most cases. For this reason ferrets need to have a primary vaccination course when they are young. The first vaccination is usually given between 8-10 weeks and the second vaccination between 12-14 weeks. After this point ferrets should be vaccinated yearly.

### **Heart worm prevention**

Ferrets are susceptible to heartworm infestation. To prevent this a monthly heartworm prevention product is recommended. Revolution® is the most commonly used product and is available from most ferret veterinarians. We can help work out how much to give your ferret at their annual check up however most adult ferrets can have one whole puppy or kitten revolution dose.





Once the dose is calculated the liquid is then applied onto the skin in between their shoulder blades or on the back of their neck. Revolution® also works to prevent fleas and other parasites that may attempt to live on or in your ferret. If Revolution® is unavailable there are other suitable products that can be used, for more information please contact us.

### **Sterilisation**

Neutering your ferret is strongly recommended. Chemical or surgical sterilisation is possible and we can discuss these different options at your health check up or vaccination. Reasons we recommend sterilisation include:

- Preventing a life threatening anaemia from developing in female ferrets
- To significantly reduce their pungent body odour
- Reducing the risk of fights occurring if you have more than one ferret
- Decreasing aggression
- Prevents unwanted pregnancies

### **Annual check up and yearly vaccination**

We recommend annual health checks for ferrets. It is a good idea to coordinate this with their annual vaccination. At this time your ferret will receive a thorough examination to help identify any problems that are occurring. Your ferrets teeth will also be checked at this point and advice on prevention and management of dental disease can be discussed.

### **Summary**

Ferrets make wonderful pets! By following the above advice you can help to reduce the chances of common problems occurring and ensure that your ferret is receiving the care that it deserves. Unfortunately even with the best care problems can still occur and if you are at all concerned about your ferret please contact us to arrange an appointment. Things to watch out for include but are not limited to the following:

- Lethargy
- Diarrhoea
- Weak hind legs
- Vomiting
- Hair loss
- Not eating or not drinking
- Dull eye colour or coat
- Dirty teeth
- Scratching excessively

