



21257 Leitersburg Pike  
Hagerstown, Maryland 21742  
240-513-6030  
[www.northpawsanimalhospital.com](http://www.northpawsanimalhospital.com)

---

## **How to Raise A Healthy Ferret**

Written by Dr. Deanna Becker

### The Primary Caretaker

Far too many parents will get a ferret for their children, and have their children be the primary caretakers. Ferrets are fine to have in households with children, as long as the parents supervise all child/ferret interactions. Children of any age should never be the primary caretaker of a ferret. With a few rare exceptions, children are just not mature and responsible enough to consistently ensure that there is always food available, that the letterboxes are kept clean, and that the cage is cleaned regularly. There are other ways to teach responsibility to a child without making an animal suffer as a result. An adult should always have primary responsibility for taking care of a ferret.

### Food and Water

Ferrets are strict carnivores and so they must have a meat-based diet. This does not mean feeding them raw food, such as mice or scraps of other animals. The protein content of ferret food should be 30-38%, fat should be 15-22%, and fiber should be less than 3%. Taurine is also required as an ingredient in ferret diet. There are a number of high quality kibble diets that meet the ferret food requirements.

Recommended ferret food brands include:

- Totally Ferret food (probably the most premium ferret food available)
- Marshall Ferret food

Cat/kitten foods that are acceptable would include:

- Eukanuba kitten or cat food
- Iams kitten or cat food
- Innova Feline food
- Pro Plan kitten food

Food should always be available 24 hours a day. Ferrets have a short digestive tract, and will eat on average every 2-4 hours. Heavy ceramic food bowls, or bowls that attach to the side of a cage are recommended, since ferrets are notorious for tipping things over. As with any pet, treats are fine when given in infrequent small amounts. Treats to avoid are poorly digestible items such as carrots or potatoes, which have been known to cause blockages in ferrets. For ferrets that are older and that may have insulinoma, treats that are high in sugar should be avoided.

One treat that is very highly recommended is Linatone, which is a liquid cat vitamin. This has also been marketed under various ferret brand names as Ferretone, Furoton,e and Ferret Linatone. Linatone has a somewhat rubbery taste to it, but most ferrets go absolutely nuts over it! It works as an excellent tool for training, and even for distraction when you are trying to do a physical exam or administer vaccinations in your clinic. Linatone should be given in moderation, as it is high in vitamin A, but about 1-2 mls can be given daily with no problem. It will also not affect glucose levels for ferrets that may have insulinoma. Water should always be available 24 hours a day, in either water bottles, or water bowls. Many ferret owners prefer water bottles, as again, ferrets have been known to tip water bowls over or even dig all of the water out. Older or debilitated ferrets ideally should have water available in bowls as they may not always make the effort to get water out of a water bottle.

### Housing

Ferrets should not be caged constantly! They are not like rodents who can live their entire lives fairly well in a cage. Ferrets are very active, very inquisitive, and must have free roam time outside of a cage for several hours a day. Ferrets that are left caged constantly will suffer muscle atrophy, become very lethargic and depressed, and live a short, unhappy life.

The majority of ferret owners will have a cage to keep the ferrets in for times when they are not home, when they may have guests over, or at night while they are sleeping. Since ferrets do sleep about 15-20 hours a day, this is acceptable, and can even be safer for ferrets that are prone to getting into things that they may not be able to get out of without human help. Many ferret owners choose to lock their ferrets up while they are at work during the day and while they sleep at night, and then let the ferrets out for a n hour in the morning, and then again for several hours in the evening, which is fine. Ferrets are not known for coming when their name is called like a dog, or finding their way back home like a cat, so ferrets should not be let outside unless on a leash with their owner.

Cages come in a variety of sizes and shapes. Cages that should not be used are ones made of wood or glass/Plexiglas. Cages made of wood will tend to soak up urine from "accidents", and as a result are harder to clean. Glass or plexiglass cages make the ferret feel isolated, and minimize or eliminate fresh air from circling through. Wire cages, or wire coated with plastic, are ideal fro keeping ferrets in, as they are easy to clean, allow for fresh air, and keep the ferret from feeling isolated. However, wire cage bottoms are hard on ferret feet, so the cages should be lined with either pieces of linoleum (usually available as scraps free or very cheap from a carpet store), or with carpet remnants or ever just bedding such as towels or blankets. Wood shavings should never be used, as the aromatic oils and dust in the shavings can cause respiratory problems for the ferrets. Ferrets like small cozy places to sleep, so in the cage there should be several area s of soft bedding such as old sweatshirts or blankets that ferrets can curl up in. Hammocks are also good, although in my personal experience; ferrets will usually not use hammocks quite as often if they have other, cozier options of places to sleep. Cages should have at least 2 levels, and be at minimum 2'x3'x2' or bigger.

Cages should always be purchased with ease of cleaning in mind, as cages that are difficult to clean because of limited access may not get cleaned as often. Cages should be cleaned at minimum at least once a week, and the litter box should be changed or cleaned at least 2-3 times a week. Daily cleaning of litter boxes is ideal, but not every owner will feel it is necessary. Litter boxes should be able to be secured to the cage, but be easily removed by the owners, and should be large enough for the ferret to fit their entire body in. Ideal litter would be wood pellets, recycled newspaper pellets, or corn cob pellets. Regular clay

cat litters are very dusty for ferrets that may like to nose around in clean litter, and especially clumping cat litters can cause problems. The new crystal litters should not be used, as they can suck the moisture out of an eye that may come in contact with them, which could potentially cause optic problems.

### Ferret-Proofing Your House

Before your ferret is let out to have free roam in the house for the first time the house should be thoroughly “ferretproofed”, as ferrets are small and very inquisitive. They tend to get into places that they may not be able to get back out of. Rule of thumb, if the head will fit, the body will follow. Owners should crawl around the house and inspect every square inch around the floor and walls. Ventilation ducts should be secured, so that the ferrets cannot pull the cover away, and go in. Objects that ferrets like to chew on such as shoes, rubber dog toys, and erasers should be stored out of reach of ferrets to avoid potential blockages. Cupboards should be fastened with child safety locks, as ferrets are notorious for opening cupboards, and may get into the wall of floor from holes around plumbing pipes. Large appliances, such as refrigerators, ovens, washers, and dryers should either be kept off limits, or inspected and secured from ferrets crawling inside. Ideally, even if they are just kept off limits, they should still be ferretproofed, as ferrets are also notorious for slipping past owners and getting into off limit areas. Couches should be flipped over, and have the underside board up with plywood, or covered with very heavy duty fabric, as many ferrets have died when an unsuspecting owner sits down on a couch with a ferret inside. Futons are ideal. Recliners and sofa beds are hard to ferretproof, and so owners should just be extremely careful when using a recliner or sofa bed. Even once a home is considered ferretproofed, there is never a 100% guarantee, and owners should watch their ferrets carefully for the first few months to ensure that they didn't miss anything. A variety of things can be used to keep ferrets out of a certain rooms. Some of the most successful have been things like cutting a piece of plexiglass or plywood to fit, and then using brackets to hold it in place thus having the ability to slide it in and out of doorways. Another method is to take a regular wood frame baby gate and cut and staple floor vinyl (hardwood floor coverings) or linoleum to it. This way it can still be adjusted, but the ferrets cannot climb over or through it.

### The Ferret-Human Bond

Ferrets bond very strongly to their human owners, and will suffer if ignored. Ferret owners should spend at least on average 30 minutes or more a day giving personal attention to their ferrets. Some ideas for ferret/owner interaction include:

- playing games
- taking a walk (on a leash)
- grooming
- carrying the ferret around while doing other tasks
- picking them up periodically for short bursts of attention

Many ferrets will seek out their owners to play with them, and will grab on to their feet or legs, or drag things around to get their attention. In some cases, they can nip on the ankle to get their owners attention. Some ferret owners may decide to find another home for their ferret because they feel guilty for not spending enough time with their pet. Since time demands can change over the years, and since ferrets do bond so strongly to their owners, it may be a good idea for owners to get a second ferret so the

first ferret has someone to play with. Frequent short bursts of attention while doing other things around the home can also benefit both ferret and owner.

### Grooming

Ferrets will groom their own fur, much like a cat, so bathing is not always necessary. However, many owners prefer to bathe their ferrets, not only in term of odor control, but also if they take them outside frequently, or if they have young children who handle them. If they do decide to bathe their ferrets, they should use a mild shampoo, such as one made for ferrets or kittens. A conditioner after the shampoo is recommended as ferrets are prone to dry skin with frequent bathing. Ferrets should not be bathed with soap more than once a week at most. Once or twice ea month is more than sufficient for the average ferret owner who prefers to bathe their ferrets. When ferrets are bathed, the sebaceous glands in their skin will be temporarily stripped of sebum, and so a ferret's odor will be pretty much eliminated. However, many ferret owners have noted that about 2 weeks after a bath the odor comes back twice as strong. It has been hypothesized that this is a result of the sebaceous glands trying to compensate for the drying effect from the bath, and so going into an "overdrive". Regardless of the reason, the odor will eventually go back down to normal after a month or so. Because of this, many ferret owners choose to either not bathe their ferrets at all, or to do so on a weekly or biweekly basis.

Nail clipping should be done on a regular basis. The owner at home using regular human nail clippers can do this fairly easily. If there are two people available to do the nail clipping, one person can scruff the ferret while the other clips the nails. If there is only one persona available to clip the nails it can still be done with ease. The best way is for the owner to sit down on a chair, and lay the ferret down on the back. Linatone is then dribble onto the ferret's stomach, and the ferret is directed to it. While the ferret happily licks up the linatone, the owner can easily clip the nails.

Ear cleaning can also be done by the ferret owner at home and can also be done by either one person or two. While the owner scruffs the ferret, they can do a quick sweep into each ear with a q-tip and some ferret ear wash. A second person may be required for additional restraint and possible diversion with linatone for ferrets who are very sensitive about their ears.

Owners at home can also do teeth cleaning. The smallest size pet toothbrush or a soft pediatric toothbrush and pet toothpaste will work quite well for ferrets. The teeth should be in fairly good condition initially, as older ferrets that have rotting teeth and gums can bleed very easily. The owner should place a small amount of the toothpaste on the brush, and while scruffing the ferret, lightly brush the teeth to remove food deposits. *If bleeding occurs, the owner should stop, and either try again more lightly a week or so later, or to bring the ferret to a veterinarian to check for dental disease.* Nail clipping, ear cleaning, and teeth cleaning can be done anywhere from weekly to monthly, depending on how often the client wants to do it, although it should be done at minimum at least once a month.

### Health Problems

1. Diarrhea: Diarrhea is not a disease per say, but rather a sign of a gastrointestinal problem. In ferrets, there are several conditions that can result in diarrhea. Intestinal parasites, viruses, *Helicobacter musteli* (a spirochete-type of bacterium), proliferative colitis (caused by a *Campylobacter* bacterium) are some of the more common causes of diarrhea in ferrets. Diarrhea can be treated with several different medications depending upon the cause of the diarrhea. Infectious causes of diarrhea in ferrets are treated with antibiotics and occasionally anti-ulcer medication. Owners should avoid home treatment without a proper diagnosis, as many diseases appear similar and mimic each other. Most commonly, signs of

disease in ferrets are vague and non-specific, such as a ferret with anorexia (loss of appetite) and lethargy, which can be seen with many diseases including intestinal foreign bodies, various causes of diarrhea, and many types of cancer. Any deviation from normal should be a cause for concern and requires immediate evaluation by your veterinarian.

2. Intestinal foreign bodies: Being curious creatures, ferrets commonly investigate, chew, and swallow many objects; most commonly rubber parts of shoes, furniture and mattress stuffing, rubber bands, erasers, and parts of dog and cat toys are chewed and swallowed. These obstructions are difficult to diagnose unless the owner observes the ferret swallowing the object or sees a piece of the object missing. They are hard to identify on routine radiographs (x-rays). *Intestinal foreign bodies usually require immediate surgical removal.* Since signs of foreign bodies are very similar to other diseases (such as parasites and infectious causes of diarrhea), early diagnosis and aggressive surgical intervention is important. Any deviation from normal should be a cause for concern and requires immediate evaluation by your veterinarian.

3. Vaccinations: Ferrets can contract the canine distemper virus. Like dogs, *it is fatal*. Ferrets should be vaccinated annually against this disease. Clinical signs include: loss of appetite, a thick eye and/or nasal discharge (similar to pus), and often a rash on the chin, abdomen, or groin. Treatment is supportive and should be attempted as the disease mimics human influenza. The difference is that with distemper, the ferret will be dead within 1-2 weeks, whereas with influenza, the ferret should be better within 1-2 weeks.

4. Intestinal parasites: Like dogs and cats, ferrets can contract various intestinal parasites, as well as external parasites such as fleas. Yearly microscopic fecal examinations will allow easy diagnosis and treatment. Intestinal parasites are treated with the appropriate deworming medication. Most commonly, signs of disease in ferrets are vague and nonspecific, such as a ferret with anorexia (loss of appetite) and lethargy, which can be seen with many diseases including intestinal foreign bodies, various causes of diarrhea, and many types of cancer. Any deviation from normal should be a cause for concern and requires immediate evaluation by your veterinarian.

5. External parasites: Fleas, ticks, mange, and ear mites can also infect ferrets.

6. Ringworm: Ringworm is occasionally seen in ferrets and usually manifests as a circular area of hair loss with slight scaliness along the periphery of the circle. Diagnosis can only be as accurately made with a special culture of the skin, scales, and hair. It can be transmitted to other pets and to humans, so care should be used in handling infected ferrets. Ringworm can be treated much the same as it is in dogs and cats and involves medicated shampooing, topical medications, and oral medication for severe infections. Mild infections often respond to topical therapy alone. Since ringworm appears similar to other skin conditions, correct diagnosis is important before treatment is started.

7. Cancer: Unlike dogs and cats, ferrets contract cancer quite readily and early in life. Since early detection is critical to survival, every ferret three years of age and older should have a geriatric screening at least annually. This screening includes a complete blood count and blood chemistry profile, radiographs (x-rays) of the chest and abdomen, and urinalysis. There are several types of cancers commonly seen in the pet ferret. These include cancer of the pancreas (called an insulinoma), adrenal gland tumors (often seen in conjunction with the insulinoma), and lymphosarcoma (cancer of the lymph nodes and lymphocytic white blood cells). Other types of cancers can also occur in ferrets; any lump or bump should be immediately aspirated by your veterinarian to check for cancer. When treated early, many types of ferret cancers can be cured but usually involve treatment with a combination of medicine and surgery. Most commonly, signs of disease in ferrets are vague and non-specific, such as a ferret with anorexia (lack of appetite) and lethargy, which can be seen in many diseases including intestinal foreign

bodies, various causes of diarrhea, and many types of cancer. Any deviation from normal should be a cause for concern and requires immediate evaluation by your veterinarian.

8. Enlarged spleen: During a physical examination, it is not uncommon for your veterinarian to find an enlarged spleen, especially if your ferret is an older pet. While not a sign of any one disease, it does indicate the need for further investigation. Several diseases that can result in a splenic enlargement include inflammation of the spleen, malignant tumors, cancer, and heart disease. Obviously, an enlarged spleen is a serious sign that indicates the need for complete laboratory testing to determine the cause. Occasionally, diagnostic tests are negative for a specific disease, in which case the diagnosis of “benign splenomegaly” will be made.

9. Human influenza: Ferrets can contract and spread human influenza, or flu. Signs are similar to people with the flu (or to ferrets with distemper). Treatment consists of antibiotics and decongestants. Occasionally fluid therapy or force-feeding by the veterinarian will need to be done. *Never* give your ferret any over the counter medications or prescription drugs without checking with the doctor first. Like dogs and cats, ferrets can be easily killed with common human medication.

10. Aplastic anemia: Aplastic anemia literally refers to bone marrow suppression, which results in a complete loss of red blood cells (and often white blood cells and platelets) in the bone marrow.

#### **Recommended Ferret Books and Websites:**

1. *Ferrets for Dummies* by Kim Schilling
2. *Ferrets: An Owner's Guide to a Happy Healthy Pet* by Mary Shefferman
3. *A Practical Guide to Ferret Care* by Deborah Jeans
4. [www.ferretcentral.org/faq](http://www.ferretcentral.org/faq)
5. [www.ferret.org](http://www.ferret.org) (American Ferret Association)



*Please call the office if you have a question or problem. Above all, enjoy your pet, give him or her your love and affection; they deserve it and will repay you with years of companionship and enjoyment.*