

What to feed junk food junkies

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Every shelter director has experienced the woes of a Junk Food Ferret, usually surrendered along with a bag of some grocery store cat food. When the shelter director proudly offers the lobster of ferret foods to the new tyke, a turned up nose is offered in return.

Unfortunately, some ferrets refuse to eat anything but cheap cat food, and although this problem is not as serious as an anorexic ferret (*see* When hungry ferrets won't eat *on page 16*), it can be equally frustrating. Ferrets have very specific nutritional needs and should eat only those foods high in animal protein and fat. The first ingredient must be a meat such as chicken. Corn or other plant products should never be the first ingredient listed on a ferret food.

Curing junk food junkies

One piece at a time. If switching a ferret from a poor food to a good one, the first thing to try is adding a few pieces of the good food to the dish of regular food. With a little luck, the ferret will try the new food and like it. Over a period of 1–2 weeks, more of the new food should be added slowly to the dish, until only the high quality diet is available to the ferret. Even if the ferret immediately likes the new food, any change in diet should be slow to avoid upsetting the ferret's gastrointestinal system.

Mixing it up. Adding the new food to a container of the ferret's regular food blends the smell of the two foods. A ferret's sense of smell tells him more about what he wants to eat than do his taste buds. If the new food smells a bit

more like the old food, he may be more likely to taste it.

Treat time. Ferrets often like the attention of being given a treat and will readily take whatever is being offered, even a new kibble, if it is first offered as a treat. When a ferret is out for playtime, a piece of the new food should be offered by hand. If this tactic works, the new food should continuously be offered as a treat for a few days. Then it can be added to the ferret's regular diet according to the suggested methods discussed above.

The old switcheroo. If a ferret will not try a food being offered, I suggest that another brand be tried. Just as some people simply do not like some foods, some ferrets do not like some kibble. If Totally Ferret (Performance Foods) isn't totally awesome to your little ones, give a try to Ultra Blend Ultimate (8 IN 1 Pet Products) or Iams Kitten Food (The Iams Company).

This time, instead of being added to the ferret's regular food, the new kibble can be put in a small pile on the floor where the ferret will be likely to find it during runtime. This is purely a psychological ploy; the idea is that if the ferret discovers the new food, he may think that he's found something that he should not have and scarf it up. This tactic has worked for me on countless occasions. If this method works, the new kibble can be blended slowly in the old food until the ferret is eating only the more nutritious diet.

I also try to always feed a blend of foods to my ferrets. Each food has its strong points and its weaknesses. One food may produce luxurious coats, while another promotes weight gain. Feeding a

variety of foods ensures that nutritional levels are balanced in the ferret's favor. In addition, if one food in the blend ever becomes unavailable, a ferret will still have in the mix the other foods he is used to eating. Companies go out of business or change the look and taste of their kibbles. Even if this should happen, a kibble blend will still smell and taste familiar, so a finicky ferret will not go hungry.

Getting a finicky ferret to switch diets is not easy; in fact, I think it is the hardest thing that I have to do as a shelter operator.

My advice to those who are struggling with the eating habits of their ferrets is to stay focused, stay positive, and never give up. It is possible to convince a ferret that Totally Ferret is totally better than Meow Mix, or that Ultimate is...well, ultimate. And when that ferret lives a longer, healthier life, he will have you to thank for it.

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