

FERRETS 101:

Choosing a Proper Diet

By Kerry Fabrizio



PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK

This edition of Ferrets 101 covers the importance of choosing the right food for your ferret—a subject on which lots of opinions get tossed around. We'll try to demystify the issue in a two-part series that discusses both kibble diets and natural diets. Let's talk first about choosing the right kibble-based diet.

The first thing to remember when choosing a proper ferret food is that ferrets are *obligate* carnivores. That means their bodies can only digest animal protein and fat. A good rule of thumb if you're providing a kibble diet is to stick with varieties that contain at least 36% protein, at least 19% fat, a meat-based main ingredient, and meat proteins in at least three of the top five ingredients. Fish can be a good source of protein, but it tends to cause odors in your ferret's feces.

Ferrets tend to imprint on a particular food by the time they reach six

months of age. Up to that time, however, they'll try virtually anything you put in front of them. The earliest months of a ferret's life are therefore a great time to experiment with different meats, kibbles and treats. This isn't to say that ferrets can't or won't change their diets once they become six months old, but, generally speaking, it does get more difficult with age. One way to keep ferrets from getting stuck on a single food is to feed them kibbles in a mix of at least two different brands. That gives them a variety of tastes and shapes, and makes it easier to change foods if you can't get a specific brand for some reason, if the formula changes, or if your ferret becomes sick and you need to feed it a special diet.

If you do need to change your ferret's diet, be sure to do so gradually. Slowly add in the new food with the old, and over time increase the amounts until you have replaced the old food entirely. Be warned that

sudden changes in diet can cause diarrhea and an upset stomach.

In the past, only dog and cat foods were available to feed pet ferrets. Cat or kitten foods were deemed adequate for their diet, and, in many cases, they still are. Kitten foods, especially, tend to provide the amount of protein and fat that ferrets require. Dog or puppy foods are a different story, however, and over the years they've been labeled taboo for feeding to ferrets. The majority of dog/puppy foods do not contain an essential amino acid called taurine. This is not a problem for dogs, but the lack of taurine can cause cardiomyopathy, or heart disease, as well as blindness, in ferrets. Luckily for us, when the pet food industry began to realize how popular ferrets were becoming, they worked to improve the selection of ferret-specific foods.

In choosing a ferret food, keep in mind that, just because there's a picture of a ferret on the label, it doesn't necessarily mean it's a good product. Often, in fact, such a label only adds to the cost of the food. So, check, check, and check the label again! You need to review the label on ferret food just as you would the label on any other food. In reading the labels, make sure you avoid ferret foods that contain dried fruits or vegetables. These can cause intestinal blockages in your ferret, which can be life-threatening.

Be aware, too, that ferrets over four years of age tend to need less protein than their younger counterparts. So be careful about switching to a higher-protein diet with an older ferret, as it can trigger underlying health issues.

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Weasel Weight Watchers

AKA FERRET FOOD FACTS

Physiology: Ferrets have a very **short, inefficient** digestive tract (from mouth to litter box in less than four hours!)



ILLUSTRATIONS: ALPHINA HO

Nutritional Must-Haves

To compensate for their digestive tract inefficiency, ferrets need a diet:

- high in animal protein (50-60%)
- high in animal fat (30-40%)
- low in fiber and carbohydrates (1-5%)

High-quality, highly digestible protein sources include chicken, turkey, eggs, fish and pork.

Plant-based protein should never be fed to ferrets!

These proteins lower urine pH and can lead to bladder stones.



FAT should be a ferret's main source of energy, **NOT CARBS!**



Specialty Diets

Insulinoma diets should be very low in carbohydrates. Supplemental protein such as chicken baby food, Hill's A/D, or Oxbow's Carnovore Care should be given at least twice a day.

Inflammatory Bowel Disease may result from allergies to certain animal proteins; alternate protein sources include pork, rabbit and duck.

Geriatric ferret diets are lower in protein, but are only necessary if the ferret has kidney damage.

Diet No-No's

Too much fiber! Decreases fat and protein absorption, leads to watery diarrhea (yuck!)

Avoid carbohydrates! Causes watery diarrhea and overstimulates insulin release, possibly leading to insulinoma (common disorder in ferrets)

NO DOG FOOD, PLEASE!



Treats!

Good treats: Cooked meat and eggs, chicken treats, and small amounts of Ferretone (fatty acid supplement; they love it!)

Bad treats: Yogurt, any fruits, any veggies, junk food, sweets, chocolate, dairy products or other sweet-flavored treats can cause various health problems

DIET

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In feeding your ferret, take note that ferrets have a very quick metabolism, which enables them to digest their food in three to four hours. Because of this, they should have kibble available to them at all times. The average ferret will eat about a quarter to a half cup of kibble every day.

Another question that comes up about feeding is whether to feed wet

or dry food. Generally, the only time you might need to feed a wet food to your ferret is when it becomes ill. A consistent all-wet diet that does not contain bone pieces can cause severe tooth decay. Be aware too, however, that a good-quality dry kibble can cause tooth *wear*. Regardless of what you decide to feed your ferret, it's important to attend to its dental health. With a good diet and, at the very least, monthly brushings

with a pet-safe toothpaste, you can ensure that your ferret's teeth and gums will remain healthy.

Kibble is a wonderfully convenient food to feed your ferret. To go along with it, make sure your pet has enough fresh water at all times.

Be sure to join us next time, when we'll tackle the subject of natural feeding.