

Basic Ferret Care

The ferret a weasel-like pet that is both adorable and mischievous, has tunneled its way into many homes and hearts. Ferrets (Latin name *Mustela putorius furo*) have been domesticated for around 2,500 years, according to Kim Schilling, author of the popular “Ferrets for Dummies” book, and for a while there was a great lack of information regarding the proper care for these critters. Ferrets did not start gaining popularity until several decades ago



(Schilling 23). Even still, there is much more to be learned about the ferret and research of these fine animals, their medical care, and their husbandry is ongoing. Luckily, there are resources out there, from books, to online forums, and even Facebook pages devoted to the little weasels that can help the new ferret owner and hopefully keep owners from making potential mistakes.

Ferret care has a steep learning curve, so one must take the initiative to study as much as one can. Their care is not similar to that of a dog or cat, and if one does not know what he or she is doing, the ferret will suffer for it. A good pet owner is one that is always striving to learn more to better care for their animal. I started out not knowing much about ferrets, and I am still learning more after over a decade of keeping these fantastic pets. The purpose of this short guide is to introduce the new or potential owner to the basics of ferret care, and I encourage you to continue your research to really understand these guys and their needs beyond what this guide covers.

First off, the new owner needs to consider the initial and potential costs of a ferret, not to mention the time required to spend with it. Ferrets are by no means inexpensive animals if cared for properly, and they require at least four hours out of their cage each day playing and exploring with your supervision. Ferrets are smart animals; they need mental stimulation and things to do or they will succumb to boredom. Being stuck in a cage all day with nothing to do is not a good life.

The ferret and its cage will probably be one’s largest initial purchase, and the bigger the cage, the better. Then one must consider all their other necessities: food, litter, litter boxes, water bottles, water and food bowls, nail clippers, ferret-safe shampoo, ear cleanser, flea preventative, heartworm preventative, toys and bedding in which they will sleep.

Veterinary costs will also be incurred. Your ferret will need a series of vaccinations for both canine distemper and rabies. The American Ferret Association recommends that you vaccinate a ferret for distemper at 8, 11 and 14 weeks of age, and then annually after that. Ferrets over 14 weeks need only two distemper shots given approximately three weeks apart. Vaccinate for rabies at 12 weeks of age and annually after that. Your ferret will also need to have a fecal examination to test for parasites, and an ADV test. ADV is Aleutian's Disease Virus, a

Parvovirus that is very contagious and deadly in ferrets. There is no cure, nor a vaccine, for ADV and the best thing you can do is to try to prevent it from entering your home, says Schilling. When bringing any new ferret home, make sure to test for ADV before introducing it to any existing ferrets, and wash up thoroughly and change clothes after handling until you are sure ADV is not present.

ADV is not the only disease a ferret owner has to worry about. Adrenal disease, insulinoma, and lymphoma are other common diseases that plague older ferrets. These diseases are an important reason to have plenty of money saved up in the bank for surgeries, medications and other veterinary costs. Veterinary care for ferrets can get very costly, sometimes with bills exceeding thousands of dollars. Be prepared for big vet bills, because they will happen. Expect these diseases to start showing up at around age three or four, possibly a bit later down the line. Their average life span, due to their susceptibility to disease, is only seven to ten years. It is considered very lucky if a ferret makes it to the ripe age of ten. It is important that one finds a ferret-savvy vet that has experience with these diseases as well as other ferret medical issues, and it is just as important to investigate these diseases more so that one knows what to look for when regularly monitoring your ferret's behavior and habits.

Now that I have scared my readers properly, I can discuss the more fun aspects of ferret ownership, such as choosing its cage and decorating it. There are a lot of cages to choose from; some are great for ferrets and others aren't so great. As stated earlier, the bigger the cage, the better! Ferrets enjoy large cages with multiple levels and plenty of beds in which to snooze. The floors and shelves of the cage need to be solid, not wire, so that they will not hurt the ferret's feet. Pet stores and the Internet will provide ferret beds, sleep sacks and hammocks galore to deck out their cage into a cozy home. Old blankets or clothing may also be used for bedding; some ferrets really enjoy having the smell of their human nearby. It is also recommended to purchase a cage that is easy to clean, because ferrets are great at making messes. They are not the most fastidious of creatures and will occasionally miss the litter box. They instinctively like to use the bathroom in corners, so you will want to be easily able to stick your hand back there to clean up the offending mess. Small doors can make this very difficult. Ferrets also prefer large high-back litter boxes that they can fit their whole body in, and cages with small doors will not be able to accommodate boxes of this size. Some ferrets even like to dig in their litter boxes or food and water bowls (after all, ferrets are burrowing animals), so a cage that is easy to clean is essential.



When a pet ferret is not in its cage, the area in which it is roaming absolutely must be ferret-proofed, not much differently than a parent would child-proof for a new baby. Ferrets are prone to intestinal blockages requiring expensive, invasive surgery because they love to chew on things they shouldn't, such as rubber, foam rubber or Styrofoam. Keep these kinds of items out of reach! Think of a ferret like a two year old child; anything one wouldn't want a two year old eating must be kept away from a ferret. It is best to keep ferrets out of kitchen and laundry areas. They have been known to climb inside the backs of refrigerators and not come back out, or escape outside through laundry vents. Check the areas they have access to for holes that they could possibly escape outdoors or inside of walls. Screw in floor vents because a determined ferret can lift them. If the ferret's head can fit, so can the rest of the body. If the ferret is a chewer, keep electrical cords away from them. Also beware of recliners and sofa beds; ferrets can become trapped in them and crushed to death when opened or closed. Rocking chairs could also easily harm a ferret underfoot. Ferrets are very inquisitive and accident prone, as they are always finding trouble to get into. Play it safe, and if you think something might harm a ferret, it's best to not have it around a ferret at all.

When a ferret is out and about, it will need several high-back litter boxes placed in corners of the ferret's preference. There are many choices for litter out there and some are not ferret-safe, so be careful what litter you buy. Ferrets have sensitive respiratory systems, so you will want a litter with little to no dust; that means no clay litters! Clay litter, apart from being dusty, can also be ingested and cause a blockage in your pet's intestines. There are litters made from corn, pine pellets, newspaper pellets, and other eco-friendly options. These will be more ideal for ferrets. The litter needs to be scooped daily and deep cleaned once a month. You can use hot water and liquid dish soap. For accidents outside the boxes you will need plenty of paper towels, an ammonia-free cleaner (I use vinegar as it is natural, cheap and harmless), and possibly carpet cleaner if your ferrets are kept in carpeted areas.

Ferrets defecate and urinate often, every four hours or so, because of their fast metabolisms. These fast metabolisms require ferrets to be free-fed. They need access to food and water at all times. A good diet will help to reduce odors and reduce fecal size and hopefully keep your ferret healthy for years to come. There are several different diets you can feed your ferret: kibble, wet



food, commercial raw diets such as freeze dried raw or frozen raw, or raw meat and whole prey that is prepared and balanced by the owner. Ferrets are obligate carnivores, meaning simply that they are obligated to eat only meats, bones, and organs. They cannot digest fruits, vegetables, or grains. These ingredients are useless for a ferret and can cause more harm than good, and it is thought that diet plays a large role in ferrets that develop insulinoma. If one chooses to feed kibble or wet food, make sure that it is formulated for ferrets, cats, or kittens, and that it has several meat sources in the first few ingredients.

Kibble for your ferret needs to contain 30% or more protein, at least 20% fat, and less than 3% fiber. Wet food usually contains more meat than kibble, and is thought to keep the ferret better hydrated; however, it spoils more quickly and needs to be replaced more regularly. Natural diets which are composed of raw meat, bones, organs and whole prey, or even commercial raw diets, are another option that many ferret owners and ferret lovers agree is ideal to keep a ferret at peak health. If one is considering a natural diet, it is very important that the diet be balanced, so one should get in touch with a mentor or consultant to ensure that they are giving their ferrets what they need in terms of nutrition. The better the diet, the less your ferret and its excrement will smell, and the healthier a ferret will be! A ferret owner should make sure to take the time to do more research on ferret diet so that he or she knows that they are providing the best.

Not only does diet make for a healthy ferret, so does enrichment, exercise and play. Ferrets are very intelligent and need quite a bit of mental stimulation. Some great toys are tunnels, balls, stuffed animals, toys that rattle or squeak, teaser toys for cats and dig boxes. Dig boxes, which cater to their natural digging needs, can be filled with things like biodegradable starch packing peanuts, rice, soil, sand, pasta or Easter grass. An owner can swap out toys every week or so to keep things new and exciting. There are also many games you can play with your ferret such as tag, tummy tickling or towel riding. Drag a towel along the floor and watch the ferret hop on for a ride! One of the best things an owner can do for a ferret is to get another ferret; they will keep each other entertained. Single ferrets can grow easily bored or lonely, which is why I recommend more than one.

Ferrets require little grooming. If your ferrets are fed kibble or wet food they are going to need their teeth brushed. Do not use human toothpaste, as it is dangerous to pets. Find a toothpaste that is safe for ferrets, and use a rubber finger-brush to brush their teeth every week or two; if you can brush them more often, that is even more ideal. Ferrets also need to have their nails trimmed every week or two and their ears cleaned once every couple of weeks. An easy way to trim nails is to lay your ferret on its back in your lap, place their favorite liquid treat such as salmon oil or Ferretone on their belly, and let them lick it off as you trim away. Be careful not to cut the quick, a red vein inside the nail that will hurt and bleed if nicked.



Ferrets also shed twice a year during the spring and fall, so they should be given a laxative around this time. Raw eggs, particularly the yolks, are a great hairball preventative. They can be fed a couple times a week. Another great natural laxative to have on hand is canned pumpkin (**not** pumpkin pie filling). It is more often recommended for emergency situations, such as when a blockage is suspected and is not recommended to be given regularly. As far as bathing goes, it should be done infrequently. Frequent bathing will cause the skin to dry out, and all those oils you washed away must work double-time to replace themselves, making for a smellier ferret, thus defeating the purpose of the bath. Instead, bathe only once or twice a year (unless they have gotten into something yucky), feed a high quality diet, wash bedding once or twice weekly, and keep the litter boxes clean to cut down on odor. People often associate ferrets with a foul odor, but when they come into my ferret room they are pleasantly surprised that it hardly smells at all.

In closing, ferrets can make wonderful entertaining pets, but they do require specific care so that they can live long, healthy, happy lives. There is often new information released regarding ferrets, and it is up to the ferret owner to stay informed and learn as much as one can. Ferrets are by no means easy to care for, but they are very rewarding pets and will easily weasel their way into peoples' hearts.

Bibliography

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<p>Visit the American Ferret Association to learn all about ferret care, foods & more! The American Ferret Association -- PO Box 554 Frederick, MD 21705-0554 Phone: 1-888-FERRET-1 / Fax: 1-240-358-0673 / Web: www.ferret.org / Email: afa@ferret.org</p>
