

Ferret Fitness and Enrichment: Be your Ferrets' Personal Trainer

(American Ferret Association Education Committee:
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Have you ever seen a ripped ferret? You know, one who is busy pumping iron at the gym or running interval sprints at the track? While this may sound funny, ferrets need to train and be physically fit. They also need proper nutrition to maintain this fitness. The best way to manage this is to take the crash course below and become your ferrets' personal trainer!

Your Ferrets' Gym

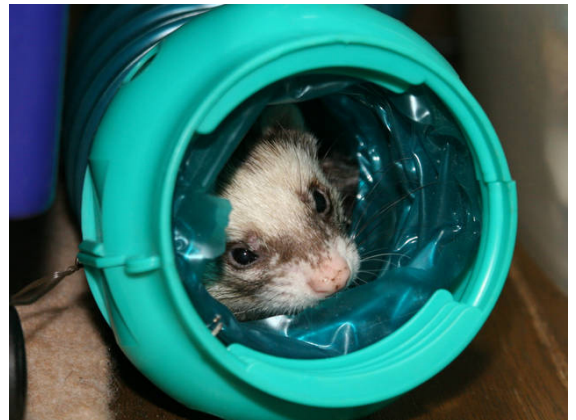
The *American Ferret Association* recommends that for their protection, ferrets should be kept in a ferret-proofed area of the home or in a large, well-ventilated cage or enclosure when not under human supervision. However, ferrets should never be confined for an extended period of time. They need exercise, affection, and human companionship to remain happy and healthy. Ferrets need a MINIMUM of 4 hours per day out of their cage, at least 2 of which should include human interaction. This is where you become their personal trainer!

Creating a safe, ferret-proofed "gym" for your ferret is the focus. Ferrets are naturally very curious and intelligent animals. As with humans, routines may become dull and can lead to lesser desire to play and be "ferrety." Consider the many ideas offered here and determine which ones can be best placed on your ferrets' training schedule. Just as with humans, changing exercise patterns frequently produces better fitness results than doing the same routine every time you work-out. Swap out or rotate toys and games frequently to keep your ferrets sharp! Just be sure to frequently check or inspect toys and gym apparatus for safety and wear and tear. Damaged toys and equipment should be discarded and replaced!

Ferret Exercise Regimen

There are so many great ways to get your ferret to exercise! Below are a few *American Ferret Association* favorites. Just remember, it may take your ferret-athlete some time to adjust to new activities. Use lots of praise and positive feedback to get them started!

- "Less is more..." - Or so says the Charmin® advertisements. Place new, whole packages of toilet paper (4 rolls in each) in a large plastic tub. Be sure to purchase the unscented variety. Slit the package in a T-shape but do not take out the toilet paper. Let the ferrets figure how to get the rolls out of the package! They LOVE toilet paper! When they have dug their way down to the cardboard cores, and scratched and fluffed up the TP, they may take naps in it as well! Multiple muscle groups are working in this activity! And the "rest phase" of the exercise is built right in! Always monitor your ferrets when they are around plastic.
- *Miners they may never be* - But ferrets are darn good at tunneling. Purchase some PVC pipe, dryer vent tubing (preferably the clear type) or let them run underneath a big rug. Place a little bit of treat on the exit end to encourage "sprints" through the tunnel. They love to play this way. It's nothing



new, but ferrets keep doing this over and over again. You can also place balls with a bell in them or other toys in the tubing to enhance the action. Monitor their play closely. Some larger ferrets could get stuck in a tube, especially where the tube is bent, its inner width tends to be narrower.



- *Some of the best toys are free!* - Paper grocery bags and cardboard boxes are a favorite among ferrets of all ages. Ferret pals will wrestle and play hide and seek, stimulating their brains as well as their bodies. When providing ferrets with boxes, first be certain they are ferret-safe by checking that there are no sharp staples, sticky packaging tape or styrofoam peanuts present.

- *Year round "swimming"* - Provide a small "pool" for ferrets. You can purchase small kiddie -pools or repurpose an under-the-bed storage container. Pour about an inch or two of water in and throw various toys in it that float. Ferrets often will jump in the tub to retrieve the toys to stash elsewhere. When it's really hot out, throw in ice cubes as they love to bat those around or sometimes they will stash those as well. It tends to keep them entertained for long periods of time especially in the summer months. In the winter when there is snow, fill the same container full of snow and let them go crazy burrowing in it. Be sure to collect snow that is free of salt/Ice Melt, other chemicals or debris that might be harmful. If you have more limited space for play, try "bobbing" for toys instead. Fill a large stoneware casserole with water (or snow), and then put their favorite plastic toys in it for them to "bob" them out. Monitor ferrets carefully when they are around or in water, never leaving them unsupervised!

- *Total gym!* - If space allows, furnish your ferrets' area with a large cat tree. Most ferrets love to climb up, which helps build muscle. Be sure to place various objects, or even a treat, at the top to provide a surprise. You can even put food flavoring, such as vanilla or lemon extract, on the platform for enrichment. Be sure to use edible, natural extracts and not artificial flavorings or flavors extracted using alcohol (ethanol), which may be harmful to ferrets. The best practice is to allow the flavoring/scent to dry before allowing ferrets access.

- *Ball pit* – Purchase a kiddie-pool or designate a ferret safe container to fill with small, plastic (not rubber!) balls. Envision the ball rooms at Chuck E. Cheese for this one! Bury treats in the pool of balls so that they have to burrow for them. This also helps build muscle while it provides a challenge! You can do something different everyday with objects and smells. Like the platform of a cat tree, you can even put edible extracts, such as vanilla or lemon, beneath the balls for enrichment.



- *Carbo-loading?* – Not really, because ferrets are carnivores! You can create a "Rice Box" by filling a bin with dry rice. Use rice that is uncooked, not "minute-rice" varieties. Ferrets love to dig and chase each other in and out of the box. Be sure to monitor the ferrets who might try to eat the rice, however, ferrets' personal trainers who use this exercise report that they have never had a ferret that's been interested in eating the rice. An added benefit, the rice soaks up excess oils, leaving ferrets smelling fresh! As with other recommended activities here, enrichments may be added to the box to keep things interesting – try edible extracts such as vanilla or lemon, natural items such as a few leaves or grass clippings and toys. An alternative to rice is pinto beans.



- *Dirt dig box* – Oh, the smell of fresh soil! Locate dirt that has not been sprayed or treated with any chemicals. Locate a large plastic tub or bin that has sides high enough to contain the dirt during play. You can add PVC pipe, tubes or tunnels to the sides of the box, but just be sure to seal openings around the tube or pipe to contain the dirt. Place about one foot of dirt in a plastic tub or bin. They love to dig holes in the dirt and burrow in it. If they happen to use it as a litter box, simply clean out the dirty stuff and add fresh dirt. This can even help curb their destructive digging and destroying of carpet. Always monitor ferrets for safety while they are exercising in the dirt!
- *Take it for a walk!* - Walking your ferret on a leash is an excellent way for them to get in their work-out and educate the public about what awesome pets they really are! Purchase a harness made for ferrets, one from which they cannot escape. The best place for a ferret to go for a walk is in a private, fenced back yard. Be sure to consider the temperature outside, not too hot or too cold. Also be aware of the surface temperatures of any asphalt or concrete on which your ferret will be walking. Choose a place for a walk that is free of gardening chemicals or pesticides and consider other animals that may be present that can impact your ferret. Make certain to bring water for proper hydration and even a few treats to entice the ferret. Teaching your ferret to walk in a harness and on a leash may also prove to be invaluable in the time of disaster or a time when you can't carry a play pen around and the ferret(s) can't stay in a crate for hours on end. Learning to walk outside may not initially be comfortable for ferrets. For training, walking along hedge lines may help them to feel safe, or in smaller fenced areas. Make sure to let your ferret know that no matter what, you will protect them.

Training partners

Just like humans have work-out pals or attend group exercise classes, ferrets need training partners. Generally, ferrets living in a ‘business’ (the proper term for a group of ferrets), will rough house, providing excellent exercise. But don’t forget, that a ferret’s playful and curious nature makes it a natural companion to some larger house pets, such as cats and dogs.

Introductions should be made with caution, however, and proper supervision is a must. Dogs

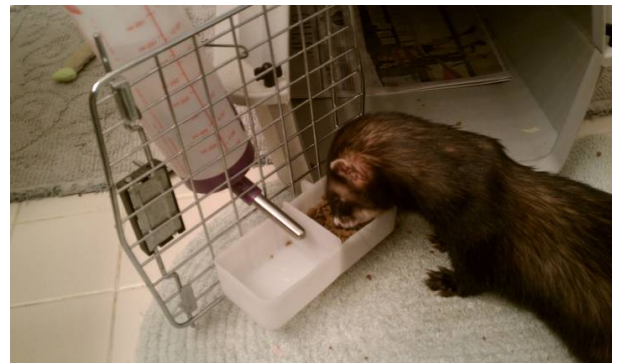
with a strong prey drive should not be introduced to ferrets. It is not recommended that ferrets be introduced to birds, rabbits, rodents (this includes hamsters, gerbils, and guinea pigs), or reptiles.



The Training Table

Athletes must eat to perform, whether human or ferret! The *American Ferret Association* recommends a balanced diet and proper nutrition that will lead your ferret to a long, active, and healthy life. Ferrets are strict carnivores; they require diets based on highly digestible animal (meat) protein with little to no carbohydrates. If you choose to feed dry food, choose high quality ferret or cat/kitten foods sold by pet shops, feed stores, and veterinarians with at least 36% protein, that is moderate in fats (approximately 20%) and low in carbohydrates. If feeding a dry food, ferrets must have access to food at all times. Because ferrets generally eat only to caloric need, this means that they will not gorge themselves simply because food is available. Ferrets have short digestive tracts and fast metabolisms which dictate that they must eat often.

Ferrets may also eat natural raw and whole prey diets. Raw diets consist of meats, bones, and organs offered in proper proportions. Many commercial brands now make balanced raw diets sold at pet stores, which can be a great addition to a raw feeding schedule. Whole prey diets rely on feeding frozen mice, chicks, etc, much like one would feed a reptile. When feeding raw or whole prey, food does not need to be left available at all times. Whether these are your whole feeding regimen or part of it - they are a valid regimen and many owners and breeders are recognizing the benefits.



No Junk-food Junkies!

Ferrets should not eat sugary cereal, peanut butter, grains, corn, rice, carbohydrates, raisins, bananas, other fruits, vegetables, dairy products, chocolate, other sweets, or any food with sugar. All of these items are loaded with complex carbohydrates and a ferret’s strictly carnivorous digestive tract cannot process these foods. Diets high in carbohydrates may lead to intestinal problems and some types of cancer.

Ferrets are obligate carnivores, meaning they must eat animal protein to survive. For this reason, the best treats to feed a ferret are meat-based. Most store-bought treats are not healthy for ferrets, even many that are labeled especially for ferrets! Acceptable food treats include a small amount of Gerber[®] or Beech Nut[®] chicken, beef, or turkey baby food (with no vegetables or starches; gravy is okay), cooked chicken breast (or other cooked meats), and freeze-dried 100% meat products. Table scraps are not an acceptable treat, nor are meats cured with salt, such as many jerkies.

Benched?

A ferrets' personal trainer should be prepared with a first aid kit, not just for use during work-outs but to be prepared for injuries at any time. Emergency planning is a must! A cooler, stocked with essential items to last at least one week, is the perfect way to be prepared, along with cages ready for immediate use. Dry food (kibble) and freeze-dried foods should be included, along with water. Human-type water bottles for water storage should be included, and of course the ferrets' water bottle from which they regularly drink. If ferrets use medications, these should be kept on hand for inclusion in the kit. Treats are also important to include to assist with praise during difficult situations. Medical first aid supplies are also important to include. A medical emergency kit should be stocked with the following supplies: nail clippers, tweezers, small curved scissors, Q-tips, cotton balls, gauze, styptic powder, antiseptic cream, children's Benadryl, rubbing alcohol or hydrogen peroxide, Preparation H[®], feeding syringes, medicating syringes, Karo syrup, wooden popsicle sticks, bandages, and unflavored Pedialyte. One reference you may want to consult is the Ferret Emergency Response, Rescue and Evacuation Team, "F.E.R.R.E.T." (ferretemergency.org). This is a website about how to prepare for emergencies. Another great resource is on Ferret Harmony (www.ferretharmony.net/references/emergency-preparedness).

It is also suggested that ferret owners keep a notebook. This should contain medical references, some photos, and other information regarding the ferrets' regular diet and care, so anyone who finds them has some guidelines on how to care for them and the identity of each ferret.

(The American Ferret Association, in existence since 1987, works to promote the domestic ferret as a companion animal through public education via shows, newsletters, legislative education, and other venues; to protect the domestic ferret against anti-ferret legislation, mistreatment, unsound breeding practices and overpopulation, needless scientific research, and any practice deemed to lower the health standards or survivability of the animal; and to provide constant and up-to-date information about veterinarians, legislative activities, medical developments, research data, rescue shelters and other information of interest to ferret fanciers everywhere. Visit us at www.ferret.org. We are also on Facebook and Twitter!