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FERRET DISTEMPER VACCINATION

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AFA's *American Ferret Report*, Vol 24 #4 contained a very valuable article on Ferret Distemper. The article pointed out some important warnings about the dangers this disease poses for ferrets. Anyone who has seen a ferret with Distemper will tell you it's something you never want to see again. The disease causes great suffering for the ferret and just about every ferret that comes down with Distemper will die from it despite anything you try to do.

While we haven't come up with any great treatments or a cure for this disease, prevention with vaccination works. And some new information gathered by AFA veterinarians has allowed us to modify vaccination recommendations. This is especially important because of how often we see anaphylactic (allergic) reactions when ferrets receive vaccines of any sort.

What we found is that, in most ferrets, once properly vaccinated the ferret will maintain immunity against Distemper for a long time, years for most and possibly a life-time for some. For this reason an annual booster may not be necessary.

We evaluate vaccination induced immunity against this disease by measuring the level (titer) of antibodies against distemper that are circulating in the ferret's blood. If the titer is above a certain concentration, we consider the ferret to be immune and further vaccination at that time is not necessary.

That doesn't mean that we abandon all vaccinations, nor does it mean we don't want to monitor whether the immunity lasts. For this reason many veterinarians are now recommending annual testing instead of annual booster. The cost may be greater but it is infinitely safer to test a blood sample from a ferret than to administer a vaccination with the risk of an adverse vaccine reaction.

Regarding reactions, it seems that compared to just about every other pet species that receive vaccines, ferrets are significantly more likely to have a bad one. This is where the allergic reaction is so severe that the ferret will begin to vomit and pass diarrhea. The intestines can become so badly involved that there is internal bleeding passed in the diarrhea. Circulatory function can collapse and the ferret can go into shock. With immediate medical treatment, most ferrets do recover. Tragically, there have been a number of reports of ferrets dying from this reaction. The death from a reaction of one of the AFA's own veterinarians was the trigger for the study that led to finding out about duration of immunity.¹

Finally, not vaccinating a ferret at all because of the fear of a possible reaction is a very bad idea. We can treat the reactions and most ferrets do survive. With Distemper, we can't treat effectively and the affected ferrets die. The choice is obvious. What does make sense is to use as few vaccines as possible while still protecting the pets.

¹ *Dr. Ruth Heller had one such ferret that had a severe reaction to a canine distemper vaccine. His name was Mongo, and unfortunately, he did not survive this reaction. In honor of Mongo, Dr. Heller, with support from the American Ferret Association headed up a study to measure the titer levels in ferrets who have previously been vaccinated against canine distemper virus. The Mongo Memorial Canine Distemper Study was established to collect data on the extent and duration of antibody titers developed in ferrets in response to vaccination.*