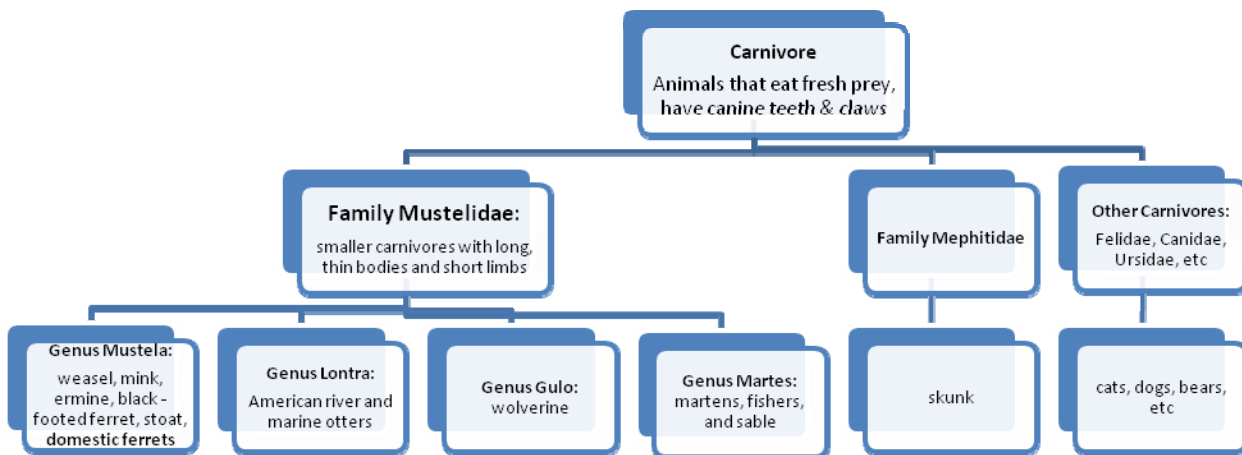




What Is A Ferret?

Domestic ferrets are small, furry mammals whose average size ranges from 1 to 5 pounds at maturity. Scientists give animals classifications to make it easier to study them. The ferret is the domesticated member of the Order *Carnivora*, Family *Mustelidae* and Genus *Mustela*. This means that ferrets are meat-eaters and one of the members of the weasel family. A common misconception is that ferrets are rodents. This is absolutely not the case, as rodents are a completely different scientific order. Scientific classifications then break down animals into specific species. The domestic ferret is species *putorius*, the same as the European polecat, and many people consider the domestic ferret to be the sub-species *furo* which differentiates the domestic ferret from the European polecat. The ferret is therefore commonly written as *Mustela putorius* or *Mustela putorius furo* in scientific binomial nomenclature.



Is the ferret a wild animal?

No, a ferret is not a wild animal. Unlike its cousins, the otter, weasel and badger, the domestic pet ferret is NOT a wild animal. Ferrets were domesticated by humans as early as 63 BCE. The domestic ferret (*Mustela [putorius] furo*) should not be confused with the wild black-footed ferret (*Mustela nigripes*), an endangered species native to the Midwestern United States. If the domestic ferret escapes outdoors, it rarely survives for more than a few days. For this reason, it is very important to ensure a ferret’s home and surroundings are safe and “ferret-proofed.”



Domestic ferret
(*Mustela [putorius] furo*)



Wild black-footed ferret
(*Mustela nigripes*)

What is the proper terminology for ferrets by gender and age?

Male ferrets are known as “hobs.” Female ferrets are referred to as “jills.” Baby ferrets are “kits,” and a group of ferrets is known as a “business.”

Where did the ferret originate?

Although the European polecat (*Mustela putorius*) is thought to be its primary ancestor, other species likely contributed to the lineage of the modern pet ferret, including the Steppe polecat (*Mustela eversmanii*) of Central and Eastern Europe, and Central Asia. Ferret – human interactions are documented throughout world history. Ferrets were mentioned as early as 450 BCE by the Greek playwright, Aristophanes, who drew similarities between the Achaeans (one classical name for the Greeks) to ferrets in their abilities as thieves. Some historians also believe ferrets were being kept by ancient Egyptians as pets before cats became popular. There is also a possible mention of ferrets in an older version of the King James Bible. However, since the word for ferret has historically been difficult to translate, it is not conclusive that this mention is truly a ferret as some have deciphered the reference as weasel or even lizard!

The first universally accepted reference to the ferret was in 63 BCE by a Greek historian named Strabo. Strabo stated that the ferret was bred in captivity in Libya and used for hunting rabbits.

“It [Libya] also produces ferrets, equal in size to cats, and like them, except that their noses project further...” (*The Geography of Strabo*, 17. 3. 4-5)

By 600 AD the ferret had made it to Spain to hunt rabbits. As cultures spread throughout the Mediterranean and into Europe, they adopted the rabbit as a protein source, and so the ferret accompanied them as the hunter. Multiple references to use of ferrets in hunting and for rodent control are noted after the 13th century throughout Europe. Their arrival in the New World occurred when explorers and colonists brought them along as mousers in their ships.



Women Hunting Rabbits with a Ferret
From the Queen Mary Psalter, 1316-1321
(British Library, MS Royal 2. B. VII)

Do ferrets make good pets?

Yes! Ferrets combine the best features of dogs and cats with some unique features of their own. Like cats, ferrets are small and quiet. Like dogs, they are affectionate, playful, and enjoy human interaction. They are independent, yet enjoy being with people. Their mischievous and playful nature, retained well into old age, makes them entertaining companions.



How intelligent is a ferret?

Ferrets will surprise and delight you with what they can do and learn. They recognize their name, respond to verbal and visual commands, and can even learn to do tricks. Ferrets can also be litter-box trained. The behaviors you want to see in your ferret can best be achieved by training using praise or appropriate treats (see below).

Do ferrets bite?

A healthy, well-trained ferret should not bite. Like all pets, ferrets need to be taught what acceptable behavior is. Ferrets have a lower bite rate than other household pets - you are less likely to be bit by a ferret than by the family dog.

What should a ferret eat?

A balanced diet and proper nutrition 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 (also called frankenprey or prey-model) 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.

Ferrets imprint on their food during the first year of life so they should eat a mix of kibble and meats so they become accustomed to different flavors. This becomes especially important during illness, as fussy eaters are difficult to feed. Because of this, many owners recommend feeding a soupy mixture as a treat frequently, and to keep it on hand in case illness strikes. Most people refer to this as “duck soup” and there are many recipes out there, usually involving kibble soaked in water, baby food, oils, kitten replacer milk, goat’s milk or a variety of other supplements. When deciding on changing your ferret’s diet, make sure to do the proper research and consult with your veterinarian.

What foods should I not feed my ferret?

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.



What are the best treats to feed a ferret?

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.

Are ferrets nocturnal?

Ferrets are not nocturnal. They sleep an average of 18 hours per day, but will adjust their schedule to yours and be eager to play when you are.



Do ferrets have an odor?

Ferrets naturally have a light, musky odor. This odor is greatly minimized when the animal is spayed or neutered. Ferrets also have scent glands which release scent as a defense. These glands can be surgically removed, but it is not recommended unless medically necessary and will not reduce a ferret's natural scent. Frequent bathing is discouraged as it removes oils that protect the ferret's fur. This causes an over-production of oil, which may increase the ferret's natural odor. Baths may be given no more than once per month and as infrequent as every few months. Be sure to use a very mild shampoo, like one manufactured especially for ferrets. Regular ear cleaning may also help with a ferret's odor. Overall, clean bedding and a healthy diet are the best ways to minimize a ferret's odor.

Are ferrets cage animals?

For their protection, ferrets should be kept in a ferret-proofed area of the home or in a large, well-ventilated cage 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.



A ferret's cage and play areas should include plenty of soft bedding, safe toys, and litter boxes filled with paper-based or wood-based pellet form litter. The ferret's living space should be temperature controlled, with the temperature kept in their comfort range of between 50 and 80 degrees Fahrenheit . Ferrets cannot tolerate temperatures above 85 degrees Fahrenheit.



Do ferrets get along with other pets?

A ferret's playful and curious nature makes it a natural companion to most larger house pets. 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.

What health care does a ferret require?

An annual visit to a ferret-knowledgeable veterinarian helps to identify potential problems early. This yearly visit should include a careful physical exam, inspection of the ears for mites, and inspection of the teeth. Dental cleanings should be performed as necessary. Ferrets should be immunized for rabies and canine distemper using only vaccines approved for use in ferrets. A test for Aleutian Disease Virus should be done at least once a year to ensure that your ferret is not carrying this highly contagious and potentially fatal disease.

What diseases can ferrets get?

Ferrets are susceptible to canine distemper and Aleutian Disease Virus. In addition, they can come down with flu-like symptoms or respiratory illnesses, similar to the "common cold," which can be transmitted by human companions. It is important to handle a ferret with extreme caution should you become ill.

Most commonly seen are diseases of the adrenal glands and pancreas. Signs of an adrenal gland disorder include hair loss, muscle atrophy, urinary blockage in males, and enlarged vulva in females. Pancreatic diseases in the ferret include insulinoma, tumors on the pancreas that cause over secretion of insulin and abnormal blood sugar levels. Signs of pancreatic disease include lethargy, nausea, and seizures. One other disease seen in ferrets is lymphoma, cancers of the lymph system. Signs of lymphoma include weight loss, enlarged spleen, difficulty breathing and lethargy. Veterinary treatment of these diseases can keep a ferret happy and playful and extend their life expectancy.

Any digestive problem (changes in bowel routine, extreme weight gain or loss, vomiting) a ferret experiences is potentially serious. The best way to prevent these problems is to keep the ferret in an environment that is clean and free of dangerous objects. Foam packaging peanuts, rubber chew toys, erasers, shoes, rubber bands, latex, or plastic items should be kept away from the ferret.

Can ferrets get fleas or heartworm?

Ferrets exposed to the outdoors or other outdoor pets can acquire fleas. Consult an experienced veterinarian prior to use of any flea product, as ferrets are very sensitive to many pesticides. Ferrets are also at risk for heartworm which is carried by mosquitoes. Ask your veterinarian for a recommendation of a ferret-safe heartworm preventative, if needed.

What about ferrets and children?

Children and ferrets can be wonderful playmates. A child should be taught how to hold and care for a ferret through plenty of modeling by adults in the household and then lots of practice. It should be emphasized that ferrets must be kept in their safe, ferret-proofed surroundings, are happiest playing with their own toys and should never be fed inappropriate treats like candy. Small children should never be left unsupervised with any animal, no matter how trusted the pet.



How long do ferrets live?

A healthy ferret can live anywhere from 6 to 10 years. The best way to maintain a healthy ferret is to be certain to take your ferret for annual vet check-ups and vaccinations.



What grooming is required?

Proper grooming and maintenance are vital for a happy, healthy ferret. Ferrets are naturally clean animals and will groom themselves often. They will shed their fur twice a year and should be combed during these times to remove loose fur. Baths can be given if necessary, but are not recommended more than a few times a year. An experienced ferret veterinarian can demonstrate proper grooming techniques. Using these techniques, a ferret's nails should be trimmed every two weeks. Ears should be checked for wax buildup or mites at the same time. Teeth should be brushed at least once a month with ferret toothpaste and a soft small pet toothbrush. They should be checked for tartar buildup at this time and cleaned by a veterinarian as needed.

Should a ferret be altered?

It is strongly recommended that pet ferrets be altered by 7 to 9 months of age for females and 6 to 8 months for males.

- Females (known as jills) may go into heat as early as 5 months of age and no later than 7 – 9 months of age. If the jill is not bred or given a hormone shot, the resulting condition is often fatal.
- Males (known as hobs) that are not neutered produce a strong odor that many people find unpleasant. Ideally, a hob should reach full growth (6 to 8 months of age) before being neutered.



What about rabies and distemper?

On February 7, 1990, the U.S.D.A. licensed the first rabies vaccine for use in ferrets. This vaccine is known as IMRAB-3 and is a killed virus vaccine also approved for use in dogs and cats. Ferrets should also be vaccinated with an approved vaccine to prevent canine distemper.