

Planning for Your Ferrets' Care When You Are Not There

For most ferret owners, our fuzzies are an incredibly special and important part of our lives. We go to extremes to feed them right, house them safely, provide snuggles and play time. And, we LOVE to share about them. So, the people around us such as family and friends are very aware of their central place in our lives. But, if you were suddenly called away, became ill or heaven forbid, were to unexpectedly pass away... who would step up and care for your fuzzies? Planning ahead for such cases is critical. Here are some ways to assure that your ferrets will get what they need, when they need it, if you are not around.

First, if your ferrets will be cared for by someone else for the short or long term, ask the caregiver to notify your veterinarian. Have them explain who they are and for what duration they will be providing care. You may even consider providing to your vet the name(s) of your designated caregivers in time of emergency. In this way, the vet will know it is permissible to discuss the ferret and provide needed information for its proper care.

Next, keep a list or notebook of your ferret's daily needs and routine.

Maintain a copy of your list on your computer for frequent updating and have a print copy ready in an easy to find location where you house your ferrets. It is a good idea to include pictures of your ferrets for caregivers so they can tell them apart, and be sure to update the pictures regularly because of coat changes. This is important because to many people, all brown ferrets look alike, so being able to identify a ferret by various nose markings or another distinguishing feature could be helpful. The list and photos enable any caregiver to provide for immediate needs. Be highly specific in describing the locations of all foods, litter, medications, treats, etc. The categories on this list might include:

- Legal Ferret Zones – Map out and/or describe those areas where ferrets are and are NOT allowed to play and also advice on how to keep them in their safe zone with descriptions of doors, gates, etc. It may seem extreme, but even add comments such as “Make sure their door is latched all the way.” And, be certain to explain any quirks in how cage doors may be secured. We know ferrets will test and prod to escape, but others may not fully understand the tenacity of these little guys.
- Food & Water – It is critical to have specific explanations of where food is stored, how much and when to give the ferrets, how to use and hang water bottles or how often to refill bowls.



Mayhem (Photo Credit: Jennifer Larsen)

- Litter or Papers – Ferrets have different potty routines. Let the caregiver know what those are and provide expectations for how often to clean boxes and potty areas. Also, be sure to explain what to do when there is an accident and how best to clean up the mess. Make sure all cleaning product bottles are labeled and remind caregivers never to spray products when the ferrets are nearby.
- Medications – Many ferrets are on meds or may have an implant. Provide explicit directions for the storage and administration of all medications, including supplements. Also be sure to explain where and how medications can be refilled. Provide a brief health bio for each ferret to include dates/times for administration of meds, vaccine schedules, implant schedules and other ferret specific health needs such as NO vaccines for a ferret that has had a reaction. Of course, your vet may be aware of these things, but what if the caregiver goes to another vet? Err on the side of too much information!
- Treats – It is important to be very specific about how often and what types of treats ferrets can enjoy. Non-ferret owners who have pets might not understand the dietary needs of our little obligate carnivores nor the rapid metabolisms and digestive tracts of our ferrets
- How to play with & handle weasels – This may sound silly to a ferret owner, but ferrets are comical and a mystery to others. Be specific about legal play areas, especially in areas like the bathroom where the tub or toilet can be a hazard. Also explain specific behaviors that caregivers are likely to see. The first time someone sees one ferret dragging another away to stash it, they may be appalled. Be sure to explain typical ferret behaviors!
- “Where we hang out” – Provide a list and description of all the places your ferrets regularly play and hide/sleep. Even after years of ferret ownership, it is common to have to hunt out ferrets who have found a new hidey hole to snuggle into.
- Misbehavior - Bad weasels can be disciplined via time outs and positive reinforcement for proper behavior. Make certain a caregiver knows they do NOT understand being smacked or flicked. This is a very different approach than many people take with a dog or cat. Be specific about ferrets that nip during play or ones who may have a biting problem, especially with strangers. Explain the various mats and rug fragments taped about ferret play areas and ferrets’ need to scratch and dig. These carpet/floor reinforcements should be monitored and replaced as needed.
- How to get help – Be sure to include a list of contacts (usually fellow ferret owners) and their numbers if a ferret caregiver simply has a question when you are unavailable. Print out or provide links to web sites such as the American Ferret Association (www.ferret.org). Also, include the name, phone number and directions to your regular vet as well as the nearest ferret-friendly emergency clinic.

Finally, beyond being prepared for immediate assistance for you ferrets if you are not able to be home, it is necessary to plan for longer-term care if you are hurt or pass away. Have a specific plan written out and include your wishes for your ferrets in your will. Your estate planner or attorney will have explicit legal language just for this. This is a serious consideration and must be discussed well ahead with the person who will take

your ferrets. Make certain they are willing. It is not acceptable to assume that someone who loved you will just take your ferrets simply because you are gone.

Once you have designated the person who will take your ferrets, converse and plan for this including topics such as safe and proper housing, their compatibility with other pets in the household where the ferrets will be re-homed and veterinary care. The costs of ferret ownership must be considered Can the person you bequeath your fuzzies to afford to maintain them? One way to plan for this is to maintain a small fund or even have a small life insurance policy that is stipulated in your will for use in caring for your ferrets. Often banks, brokerages and insurance companies offer such plans for a small monthly amount. Make certain that the funds you plan to make available are very specifically designated for use in the ferrets' care and not by the caregiver for other purposes. Provide for a way for the executor of your estate to monitor or manage this. Again, your estate planner or attorney will have specific legal language just for this.

None of us wants to consider being away from our ferrets. Sadly, this happens to ferrets and other pets every day. The last thing we would want is for the ferrets to endure some radical change from their routine. Or worse, without planning, to end up in a shelter or rescue in search of a new home. Plan ahead and be prepared. Whether for a few days or a lifetime, our ferrets deserve to be considered when we are not available.

Robin Landes, the author, is a school teacher in Virginia who has shared her time with ferrets for thirty years. This article originally appeared on the blog, Mustelamania, with the author's permission.

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 E-Mail: afa@ferret.org

