



The American Ferret Association, Inc.

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AFA Position Statement on Descending of Ferrets

Ferrets are known to have their own natural musky scent. This scent is present in all ferrets, whether they're early spay/neuter ferrets, later alter ferrets, or intact ferrets (not spayed or neutered). Contrary to common belief, however, the natural scent in ferrets has nothing to do with their anal glands. The scent is in fact produced by oils in the skin and is mostly apparent in intact ferrets who are cycling into their reproductive season. Once a ferret is spayed or neutered, most of its odor is eliminated, though a light musky scent will remain. Owners who may find this remaining scent stronger than usual can easily alleviate the problem by replacing the ferret's bedding (hammock, sleep sacks, etc.) with clean bedding. Frequent bathing is not recommended. This will in fact have the opposite effect to the one desired, since the ferret's skin will produce more oils to replenish what was lost in the bath.

In addition to their natural musky scent, ferrets, like skunks, are born with the capacity to emit strong odors through their anal (scent) glands. As applied to domestic ferrets, the term "descending" refers to the surgical removal of these glands. The term is misleading, however, since it seems to imply the removal of natural body scents that, in mild form, are a permanent feature of ferret physiology. These scents can never be totally eliminated, since, in ferrets, they are not produced by the anal glands but by sebaceous secretions of the skin.

Nevertheless, surgical removal of the anal glands is routinely performed on early spay/neuter ferrets (most commonly pet store ferrets) before they are shipped to the pet stores. It is this operation that is misleadingly labeled "descending" a ferret, giving the false impression to many that it results in a ferret that "will not smell" or "will not have an odor or scent." This labeling is in fact a selling tool used by pet stores to lure the uneducated consumer. The truth is that removing a ferret's scent glands will have absolutely no effect on its natural musky body scent. And, in fact, some veterinarians, breeders, and shelter operators consider the surgical procedure called "descending" a form of ferret mutilation.

The only real difference between a ferret that has had its anal glands removed and one that has not is that the ferret retaining its anal glands can use them to emit a burst of scent. Such emissions admittedly have a rather strong smell. But they occur very infrequently when the ferret is somehow frightened, and the smell dissipates within just a few minutes.

The American Ferret Association strongly opposes the practice of descending of ferrets. Surgical removal of the anal scent gland should only be performed by a licensed veterinarian in cases where the failure to do so threatens the ferret's health or survival of the ferret.