

# Pet Ferrets

GENERAL CARE SHEET



**AMC**

Animal Medical Center

SINCE 1910

# Pet Ferrets

## General Care Sheet

Ferrets are carnivores that have been domesticated as pets for over 2,000 years! They are loved for having a curious, playful nature and can be quite entertaining to watch. Ferrets live an average of 6-8 years, but some have lived up to 12. In order to keep ferrets healthy and long-lived, it is important to understand that due to their playful nature, they can get themselves into some trouble around the house. **Ferret-proofing a house is essential** to prevent furniture chewing, escaping, and foreign object ingestion. Ferrets do not tolerate hot weather well and prefer to be in cooler places around the house.

### Diet

- Because they are carnivores, ferrets require a diet high in protein and fat and low in fiber.
- We advise feeding a commercial ferret food in preference to a dry kitten food. Recommended brands include Wysong and Marshalls.
- High sugar treats such as raisins or fruit should be avoided.
- Provide access to fresh water in a bowl at all times.

### Common Diseases and Health Problems

#### 1. **Insulinoma**

- This is one of the most common diseases in ferrets over 4 years of age.
- It is caused by a tumor in the pancreas that produces an abnormal amount of insulin. The resulting low blood sugar can cause weakness, excessive salivation, and seizures.
- Luckily, this disease can typically be medically or surgically managed for a time.

#### 2. **Adrenal Gland Disease**

- This disease can be seen in spayed female or neutered male ferrets as young as 1.5 years of age.
- Most commonly, ferrets will experience hair loss, usually starting on the tail. However, some ferrets seem to be excessively itchy. Males may experience an enlarged prostate and have difficulty urinating. Females can have an enlarged vulva. Some ferrets also display aggression.
- Diagnosing this disease usually includes an abdominal ultrasound as well as a blood test.
- There are both surgical and medical treatment options.

#### 3. **Lymphoma**

- Unfortunately, this disease is seen in ferrets as young as 10 months old and up to geriatric ferrets.
- Swollen lymph nodes, enlarged liver, spleen, or thymus are usually seen in these cases.
- Some treatment success has been seen with chemotherapy, however there is no cure.

#### 4. **Heart Disease**

- Dilated cardiomyopathy is common in older ferrets.
- These pets present with weakness, weight loss, and an increased respiratory rate.
- Rarely will ferrets with heart disease cough.

#### 5. **Gastrointestinal Disease**

- Foreign body obstruction is seen frequently and results when a ferret eats an object that its body cannot digest. This is considered an emergency situation. Unlike our cat and dog companions, ferrets with foreign bodies will not vomit.

#### 6. **Enlarged Spleen**

- Approximately 90% of ferrets have an enlarged spleen.
- It is usually benign. However, on occasion, cancer of the spleen or excessive mechanical pressure may require surgical removal.

## 7. **Dental Disease**

- Tartar accumulation and gingivitis are common in ferrets.
- Any ferret that stops eating or has a foul odor from its mouth should be examined and may benefit from a dental procedure.

### **Recommended Veterinary Care**

- Yearly physical examination including a dental exam.
- Weight determination and nail trim.
- Review diet.
- **Vaccines:**
  - Distemper starting at 8-9 weeks, a booster at 12-16 weeks, and then annually.
  - Rabies starting at 3 months, then annually.
- Blood tests in ferrets over 3-4 years of age.
- Blood glucose levels twice yearly in ferrets over 4 years of age, with an abdominal ultrasound if indicated.

### **Signs of Illness**

- Decreased appetite
- Diarrhea
- Straining to urinate
- Weakness
- Salivation/pawing at the mouth
- Hair loss/itchiness
- Weight loss
- Personality change

**Please call the Animal Medical Center at (212) 838-8100  
to schedule an appointment with the Exotics Service.**

Note: Our Emergency Room is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year and is equipped to see Exotics patients.