

FERRET CARE

The ferret (*Mustela putorius furo*) was first domesticated over 2000 years ago, and is thought to be descended from the European polecat. Originally it was commonly used for hunting and pest control, but now is often kept as a pet. Due to their great intelligence and inquisitive nature, they can make entertaining pets, but require a lot of attention, and have a distinctive smell.

Longevity: Ferrets can live between 6-7 years if looked after correctly

Sociability: Ferrets are best kept in pairs or groups in captivity.

Environment: Ferrets are very active and destructive animals so can be housed in a secure enclosure (minimum size 1.5m x 1m x 1m for two ferrets) preferably with multiple levels. Substrate should be multiple blankets or towels which are washed regularly (ferrets like to stash food!) and hammocks are a favourite with many ferrets.

Ferrets are susceptible to heat stress (due to lack of sweat glands) so should be protected from extremes of temperature. If kept inside do not forget their curious nature. Prevent access to anything that can be chewed, eaten or destroyed when they are unsupervised, and remember that ferrets are great escape artists so ensure their enclosure is well-secured.

Ferrets tend to urinate and defecate in a set spot. It is often easiest to let them choose initially where in the enclosure that will be and place a litter tray there. High sided litter trays (usually corner shaped ones) are best.

It is essential to provide plenty of enrichment such as foraging toys and tunnels to entertain these intelligent pets. It is however, important to bear in mind that ferrets will easily demolish many pet shop toys, so only sturdy toys should be used. Several hours of supervised play should be encouraged daily. Ferrets can also be trained to wear a harness, and can be taken out to explore.

Diet: Ferrets are true carnivores, and need a high protein (35 – 40%), high fat (>20%) diet which most dog and cat foods cannot provide. It is therefore best to feed a dry complete ferret food. Dry food (based on animal not plant protein) will help reduce the build up of plaque and dental disease. Grain free diets are detrimental to health and should not be fed. Water should always be freely available and changed daily.

Raw food diets are not recommended as they are often imbalanced and come with a higher risk of causing problems such as salmonella infections (in both humans and ferrets) and intestinal blockages which can be fatal.

We highly encourage the use of enrichment or puzzle feeders to keep ferrets occupied but make sure they are safe. The occasional whole egg can be given to provide enrichment but beware of the mess!

Preventative healthcare: We recommend annual health checks every year for pet ferrets as medical problems are more easily treated if detected at an early stage – **you can register for automatic reminders**

Ferrets who go outside should be vaccinated against distemper. Distemper is an uncommon but serious disease in ferrets, which generally starts with coughing, sneezing and discharges from the eyes and nose and is invariably fatal – **ask your vet for further information on the pros and cons of vaccination**

Ferrets are susceptible to fleas and mites just like cats and dogs. Ear mites are a particularly common problem. Regular parasite treatment may therefore be recommended, depending on your ferret's individual setup.

Insurance: We highly recommend that you take out a pet insurance policy. For a monthly fee your pet can receive the best treatment at an affordable cost. There is normally an excess to pay for each condition then after that costs are covered up to a set limit. Once you have the policy, please provide us with a copy of your insurance details. There are a lot of different companies and policies available and we suggest you contact a number of them for information- we have a leaflet advising what to look out for. Our advice is to choose a policy which provides cover for chronic illness for the life of your pet. If this policy is too much for you then the best cover you can afford will provide piece of mind in an accident or emergency.

Common health complaints

- Dental disease
- Heart disease
- Lymphoma – a type of cancer of the immune system
- Insulinoma – pancreatic tumour resulting in low blood glucose, weakness, collapse, disorientation and seizures
- Adrenal disease – if neutered
- Diarrhoea and vomiting – there are many causes
- Blockages of the intestines – particularly from bones, rubber items and ear plugs!
- Obesity
- Hind limb paresis/paralysis is a common sign of weakness in ferrets
- Urinary tract stones – usually caused by eating diets high in plant rather than animal protein or grain free diets.

Neutering

Neutering a male ferret involves two options:

- Castration – the removal of the testicles
- Vasectomy – removing a section of the sperm duct to prevent them from being able to impregnate the female (now uncommon)

Castration has the advantage of not only stopping unwanted litters but reducing the smell from the glands in the skin. It can also reduce aggression. It is a straightforward procedure, similar to those performed in dogs and cats. Castration is typically undertaken at 12 weeks of age. Castrated males do not try to mate with females.

Vasectomy This is the removal of a segment of the spermatic cord to stop the male being able to impregnate the female. It is an irreversible procedure. It does not reduce the smell from the skin glands nor does it reduce aggression. Vasectomised males will mate with females but will be unable to produce offspring.

Female ferrets (jills) come into season (oestrus) in spring and summer (March to September) as the day length begins to increase. They will stay in season either until mated or until day length reduces again. When in oestrus, the vulva of the jill will become swollen and they are receptive to mating. During this time they are subject to high levels of the hormone oestrogen. This can suppress the production of red blood cells and lead to a life threatening anaemia. Female ferrets can die from the subsequent anaemia unless brought back out of season. In the wild they are mated which stops their season but results in pregnancy. This is obviously not ideal in captivity! How can we stop her developing the anaemia and stop her cycling without having litter after litter of ferrets?

There are several different ways to stop a female ferret 'cycling' (coming into season):

- Spaying – the removal of the female reproductive tract
- Mating her with an intact (uncastrated) male
- Mating her with a vasectomised male
- Giving her hormone injections 'jill jabs'
- Implanting a hormonal contraceptive or Suprelorin implant

Spaying involves the removal of the ovaries and uterus and is very similar to the procedures performed routinely on dogs and cats. The benefits are that it avoids unwanted litters, stops the female from cycling (thereby stopping the risk of the anaemia) and significantly reduces the smell from the glands in the skin.

Mating with an intact male will stop her cycling but may result in unwanted litters and will not reduce the characteristic smell.

Mating with a vasectomised male - this will avoid her having a litter and temporarily stop her season but will not reduce the smell of the skin glands. She would also have to be mated several times throughout the breeding season – every time she came into season. This process makes her believe she is pregnant and in some cases she will behave aggressively towards cage mates or owners and may even nest and produce milk which are not very desirable consequences.

Hormone injections Oestrus can also be stopped by giving her a hormone injection commonly referred to as a 'jill jab' which is usually done just as the jill is showing signs of oestrus (swollen vulva is the most obvious clinical sign) or just before the breeding season begins. The most commonly used hormone is progesterone (Delvosterone). In most jills the signs of season will have abated by 10 days after the injection and may last for the entire breeding season. A small percentage of female ferrets may need more than one injection per breeding season. This injection will also prevent her from getting pregnant and avoid the life threatening anaemia. It will not result in a reduction of the smell.

The Disadvantages of Spaying and Castrating

Research has shown that neutering ferrets (either spaying or castrating) can make them more likely to develop a condition known as 'hyperadrenocorticism' This disease is caused by changes to the adrenal glands and is often just called 'adrenal disease'. These glands begin to overproduce hormones that lead to hair loss, weight loss, vulval swelling (jills) prostatic enlargement (hobs) itchy skin and hyper-sexuality (even in neutered animals). Hyperadrenocorticism is not curable but is a treatable condition in ferrets.

The Alternative Solution: Hormone Implants - Suprelorin

- These hormones are in a slow release capsule injected under the skin - usually placed under sedation/anaesthesia.
- They can be used in both males and females but are only licensed for use in male ferrets. They stop the female ferret cycling and the male from being able to impregnate a female.
- They also reduce odour between 5 weeks and 14 weeks after implantation.
- Treated male ferrets should still be kept away from jills on heat within the first few weeks after initial treatment. In males, levels of testosterone remain low for up to 16 months. Any mating that occurs more than 16 months after the administration of the product may result in pregnancy.
- The need for subsequent implantations should be based on the increase in testis size and/or increase in plasma testosterone concentrations and return to sexual activity.
- It is not known if males injected with such implants would be able to be used for breeding at a later date so their use should be considered carefully in such circumstances.
- The implants in females can be injected at the start of spring and should last approximately 18 months (through 2 breeding seasons). A short false season may occur shortly after implantation.
- Hormonal implants should be considered a safe, effective alternative to neutering in male and female ferrets.
- Hormonal implants can also be used in ferrets who have developed adrenal disease as a therapy for controlling this condition.

