

# Ferret

*Mustela putorius furo*



**LIFE SPAN:** average 5-8 years

**AVERAGE SIZE:** Males (hobs):15-16" long; 2-3.5 lbs.

Females (jills): 13-14" long; 0.75-2.5 lbs.

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written by an expert in the pet care industry and approved by a qualified exotic veterinarian

the information on this care sheet is a basic overview and not a substitute for veterinary care. For more information and to find a qualified exotic mammal veterinarian, go to [www.AEMV.org](http://www.AEMV.org).

**WILD HISTORY:** Ferrets are mustelids. This group of animals (which includes badgers, wolverines, otters, mink, and weasels) is named for the fact that they have distinct musk glands, which are often used as a defense mechanism when they are threatened. Ferrets do not have glands that are as powerful as those of the skunk nor can they "spray" their scent. Ferrets have been domesticated for more than 2000 years and have been kept as pets in America for about 300 years (they are illegal to keep in some countries, states and/or cities in the U.S). They were, and still are in some countries, used to hunt rabbits, as they are quick, slim and very good at flushing rabbits and other small mammals out of burrows.

**PHYSICAL ATTRIBUTES:** Ferrets have slim and slinky bodies. They have small, rounded ears and tiny dark eyes. Ferrets do not have good eyesight, but their keen senses of smell and hearing more than make up for this fact. Ferrets are available in a variety of colors including sable, white, seal-point and albino. Most ferrets for sale in the U.S. pet trade have had their scent glands removed; however their skin also releases a small amount of musk, so a scent is still present. Ferrets have the typical teeth of a carnivore, including pronounced canines. Tails are approximately five inches long.

**NORMAL BEHAVIOR & INTERACTION:** The "furo" portion of the scientific name for the ferret is derived from the Latin word "furonem", which means "thief", and any experienced ferret owner will tell you that this description is extremely accurate. If you are ever missing any shiny objects, check your ferret's favorite hiding places first! Ferrets are crepuscular (most active at dawn and dusk) and sleep about 14-18 hours a day; the remaining time is spent playing and entertaining their families and playmates. When excited and playful, a ferret will exhibit what is known as the "weasel war dance", which is characterized by seemingly uncontrolled happy sideways jumps, which often end in banging into furniture or each other. Ferrets are very social animals and

prefer to live together with other ferrets. The best toy for a ferret is another ferret!

**VACCINES:** Most states require that ferrets receive a regular rabies vaccination. Rabies vaccine is first administered at 12 weeks of age, and then once a year. It is strongly recommended by most veterinarians that ferrets also receive distemper vaccines. Ferrets are extremely susceptible to canine distemper virus, which is virtually 100% fatal in ferrets. Distemper vaccine is administered several times to baby ferrets and then annually. An exotic veterinarian who routinely treats ferrets will have the proper vaccines for ferrets on hand. It is not recommended that they receive both vaccines within the same week, as it will increase the chance of a negative reaction to one of the vaccines.

**FEEDING:** Strict (obligate) Carnivores.

Ferret digestive tracts have no ability to pull nutrients from grains or other plant matter, so good ferret foods should not contain large amounts of these ingredients. Ferrets have very short digestive tracts and a very high metabolism, so they have to eat often. Make sure fresh food is available at all times. Commercial ferret foods should have 34-40% protein and 19-30% fat with low carbohydrate and fiber content. Choose foods with ingredient panels that list actual meats and meat meals such as chicken meal and egg as opposed to meat by-products. Avoid products with high levels of ingredients such as corn gluten, soy meal, and vegetable and grain items. Also be careful of hidden sugars in the form of sucrose, fructose and corn syrup. As there are now a number of excellent diets for ferrets, we do not recommend feeding dog or cat food. Good ferret treats are meat based with no sugar or carbohydrates.

**\*\* Please avoid: yogurt drops, chocolate, pasta, fruity treats, breads, crackers, cookies, breakfast cereals and any human grade junk food "treats".**

**SUPPLEMENTS:** There are several dietary supplements that promote healthy skin and a shiny coat and help ferrets pass hairballs. Follow package directions carefully for dosages as they contain vitamins and sugars that could cause problems with high amounts.

**WATER:** Clean, fresh water must always be available and should be changed daily. All water should ideally be free of fluorine, chlorine and heavy metals. We recommend that you use unflavored bottled drinking water or bottled natural spring water. If tap water is used, you should treat it with a water conditioner. If you do not want to chemically de-chlorinate the water, you can leave an open container of tap water out for about 24 hours with exposure to ultraviolet light. Do not use distilled water, which can cause severe medical problems, since it lacks minerals that are essential to important body functions.

**LITTER TRAINING:** Even in the wild, ferrets naturally tend to urinate and defecate in one certain area of their "domain" - generally a corner. This is a way of marking territory. You can use this natural behavior to your advantage by training your pet to use a litter box in order to keep the cage cleaner. Cat litters tend to be irritating to ferrets and some can create health problems, so recycled paper/newspaper pellets or untreated wood-stove pellets are recommended.

**SPAYING AND NEUTERING:** Most ferrets are purchased or adopted already spayed or neutered. If your new ferret is not, it is extremely important to do so. It should be considered just

as important as spaying or neutering a pet dog or cat. Spaying or neutering your ferret will extend its healthy lifetime.

**GROOMING:** Ferret grooming consists of fur brushing (to reduce the risk of hairballs), nail trimming (when needed), ear cleaning (use a ferret ear cleaner and cotton swabs - about once a week), and tooth brushing (use pet toothpaste and a finger brush or finger 2-3 times a week).

Baths should be limited to about once a month as more frequent baths will strip the skin of natural oils which will in turn cause the skin to release more musky oils which can make your ferret's natural odor worse. Use warm water (101-102 degrees) and a good ferret shampoo only. Carefully massage the ears, being careful not to get too much water into the ear canal. Some ferrets enjoy bathing while others don't. Be patient and respect your ferret's reaction!

#### RECOMMENDED SUPPLIES:

- Cage
- Water bottle/bowl
- Food bowl
- Food
- Bedding
- Litter box
- Fleece hide sacks/slings
- Toys
- Playpen

**HOUSING & ENVIRONMENT:** Ferrets require large cages, preferably with multiple floors. Be sure to purchase a high quality ferret cage made of safe plastic or galvanized metal which is secure, sturdy and easy to clean. Place your pet's cage in a place in the home where it will be around the family, yet protected from direct light, drafts and excess noise during the day. Absolute minimum size for two ferrets is 4 ft (long) x 2 ft (wide) x 3 ft (high). Cages should have a solid plastic bottom, for safety and for ease of cleaning. When allowing your ferret out of the cage, be sure to monitor it closely. Do not allow your ferret to roam the house or a room when it is not supervised to avoid injuries to both the ferret and/or your house. Before allowing your ferret supervised play time, scan the room for power cords, sharp objects, items that your pet can easily pick up and eat, and other items that may be a danger to your pet.

**WATER BOTTLE:** A full water bottle or bowl must be available at all times; refill it daily. Be sure to clean out the inside of the bottle thoroughly during the more intensive cage cleaning sessions every week. Water bottles will often become slimy inside, which will in turn harbor harmful bacteria. Check the spout daily for any blockages to make sure your pet always has access to the fresh water.

**BEDDING:** We recommend an aspen bedding or soft recycled newspaper bedding. Neither of these choices will cause allergic reactions or respiratory distress and it is easy to clean. **DO NOT use cedar chips or pine chips, as they contain dangerous phenols, which are toxic to your pet.**

**TOYS:** Several types of toys should be available for your ferret. Ferrets love to tunnel and hide, which means large plastic tubes are greatly enjoyed. Most ferrets appreciate fleece sacks and/or hanging tents or slings for sleeping. Feathers, plastic balls or plush toys with bells, dig boxes (cardboard boxes filled with digging material such as small plastic balls), cat crinkle toys or any other ferret toys on the market will be welcomed with zeal. Ferrets LOVE to play and

have a lot of energy to expend, so be sure to provide many playthings. **DO NOT GIVE RUBBER OR FOAM TOYS; THESE CREATE A HIGH RISK FOR INGESTION AND IMPACTION**

**HABITAT MAINTENANCE:** Daily maintenance should consist of spot cleaning by removing soiled substrate. The entire cage and water bottle should be cleaned thoroughly at least once every week with:

- A mild dishwashing liquid in warm water
- Vinegar & water (1:8) or bleach and warm water (1:32)
- Cage "furniture" should also be scrubbed clean with the same dilution.
- Rinse off all soap and bleach thoroughly with plain water before re-introducing your pet to its enclosure.
- **NEVER MIX VINEGAR AND BLEACH - IT CREATES A TOXIC SOLUTION**

**SIGNS OF A HEALTHY ANIMAL:** Healthy ferrets have a slim (not skinny) body and smooth, shiny, even fur with no bald patches. The nostrils, rump area, under-chin area, ears and eyes should be clear and free of discharge. Your pet should have bright eyes; teeth should be even and well aligned, breathing should be even and not labored, with no wheezing or gurgling sounds. Healthy ferrets are energetic and alert.

At least two visits per year with an exotic pet veterinarian are highly recommended, as ferrets are susceptible to health issues that can be managed if taken care of quickly. Be sure to quarantine any new ferret pets (especially babies) from existing ferrets in the home for at least 14 days. Take your new ferret to an exotic pet veterinarian before introducing.

#### SOME COMMON HEALTH PROBLEMS THAT REQUIRE VETERINARY EVALUATION INCLUDE:

HEALTH ISSUE	PHYSICAL SIGNS
<b>Ear Mites</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Excessive ear wax</li><li>• Scratching at ears</li><li>• Head shaking</li></ul>
<b>Fleas</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Scratching</li><li>• Hair loss</li></ul>
<b>Epizootic Catarrhal Enteritis</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Foul smelling, green diarrhea</li><li>• Lethargy</li><li>• Weight loss</li></ul>
<b>Pancreatic Insulinoma</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Weight loss</li><li>• Episodic lethargy or weakness</li><li>• Seizures</li></ul>
<b>Adrenal Disease</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Hair loss,</li><li>• Vulva swelling (females)</li><li>• Straining to urinate (males)</li></ul>
<b>Lymphoma</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Neck, armpit swellings</li><li>• Loss of appetite</li><li>• Lethargy</li></ul>
<b>Foreign Body</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Weight loss</li><li>• Lethargy</li><li>• Vomiting</li><li>• Diarrhea</li><li>• Loss of appetite</li></ul>

Please visit the House American Ferret Association website ([www.ferret.org](http://www.ferret.org)) for more information