

# Evergreen Avian & Exotic Animal Hospital

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## Ferret Etiquette & Basic Information for Ferret Owners

-Cathy A. Johnson-Delaney, DVM

### Ferret Basics

- Domesticated species *Mustela putorius furo*; *Mustela furo*?
- *Jills, hobs, kits*
- *5-7 yr life span*
- *Highest tumor rate*
- *Still illegal in Calif*

### Coat colors

- Sable & Albino: Basic colors
- Coat varies seasonally, with age
- Siamese: Brown guard hairs
- Also called "Chocolate"
- Silver mitt, Blaze, Black-eyed white, Cinnamon, ad infinitum

### Behavior

- Sleep a lot!
- Play hard!
- Very Social Animals!

### Ten Commandments of Ferrethood

1. Thou shalt poop in corners
2. Thou shalt bite thy brethren and lick thy humans
3. Thou shalt revere milk, dairy products above all things except Ferretone & Nutrical
4. Thou shalt despise anything labeled "For Ferrets"
5. Thou shalt climb everything in sight and take the good stuff.
6. When placed in a cage or locked room, thou shalt beat loudly upon the door in protest!
7. Thou shalt LURK and SEEK opportunities
8. Thou shalt love, honor, and steal shoes and socks
9. Thou shalt expose the roots of all plants
10. Thou shalt HIDE those things which should not see the light of day

- Confine when unattended for their safety!
- Ferret will nap until released
- Ferrets can be active at any time. Generally adopt activity pattern of owners
- **Vocalizations:** chuckles, giggles when playing. Soft “phaser” sound when fussing, irritated, playing. Squeal if injured, in pain.
- **Nightmares:** may groan, squeal

### **Biting, Nipping**

- Absolutely not tolerated!
- Rules similar to those of training puppies, kittens. All members of the household use same technique consistently for reinforcement.
- Do not allow “licks”. They precede nips. (lick, nip, chomp and latch on)
- Immediately scruff and disengage. Eye contact, verbal emphatic “No bite!” If ferret not paying attention, brief dominance upon the floor position.
- TIME OUT!

### **Ferret Training**

- Harness, Leash. Travel well in standard pet carriers. May adapt with a small litter pan.
- Response to cues: bells, squeaks, or clickers.
- Start by making the noise, when the ferret comes, reward (attention, bit of treat)
- Move farther away, hide, call, reward
- Important to have the ferret trained to come when called : emergencies, lost, doors open, etc.

### **Territoriality**

- Normal pet ferrets claim toys, good-natured, curious, very sociable, not particularly territorial.
- Improperly socialized, undisciplined:
- Will “attack” certain people or strangers
- Both sexes, neutered or intact
- Treatment: Confine ferret when people enter a house
- Break biting habit
- Train the ferret to come to a cue: use if the ferret starts after someone. Reward if ferret responds before attacking. Discipline if doesn’t. Time Out!

### **Litter Box Training**

- Train easily to a corner box or papers, but may need reminders all of its life.
- “Urge” strikes quickly, ferrets don’t plan ahead, easily distracted by play.
- Introduce ferret to a corner box (with pre-placed feces, or put the box where the ferret has already chosen). Set ferret in, coach verbally.
- Litter Box Training

- Key is accessibility. If there is a corner box, the ferret will use it, otherwise it will just use the corner.
- Start with a small play area with box. As the ferret learns “where” the box is, gradually increase the play area.
- Ferrets like clean boxes: dispose of feces and wet litter frequently (often several times a day)

### **Finding A Ferret Vet**

- Significant ferret experience
- What continuing education, journals do they subscribe to?
- ,Exotic Forum; Vet Clin N Am Exotics; Journal of Exotic Pet Medicine
- Member of the Assoc of NW Avian/Exotic Veterinarians?
- Member of the Assoc of Exotic Mammal Veterinarians?
- What percentage of the practice is ferrets? Number per week?

### **Veterinary Visits**

- Vaccination schedule
  - Canine distemper ending at 12-14 weeks of age; then annual
  - Rabies at 6 months, then annual (Washington State Law)
- **Annual examination until 3 years, then consider twice yearly**
  - May time a visit to “puberty” even for early spay/neuters.....current research findings.
  - **Recommend Suprelorin-F implant for all ferrets starting as young as possible to suppress sex hormones and likely suppress likelihood of development of adrenal disease.**
- **Dental cleaning.** Superficial in exam room, need sedation for deep cleaning, polishing and treating
  - Deep Dental cleaning
  - Scale
  - Polish
  - Fluoride
  - Home prophylaxis with CET malt flavor hydrolyzing toothpaste on a cotton swab at least weekly ◦ OraVet tooth sealant and home follow-up
- **Parasite checks: ears, feces**
  - Earmites – *Otodectes cynotis*
  - Chronic problem – see pigmentation
  - May be fairly ivermectin resistant
  - Multiple treatments, bath next day
  - All ferrets in the home

### **Fleas: All mammals in house!!!!!!**

- Revolution; Advantage; Program; Frontline
- Small cat dosages or partial cat dosages
- May also help with earmites
- Premise control: vacuum, spray access areas

### **Comprehensive Veterinary Exam**

- Age 3 and older: Geriatric
- CBC, chemistries – baseline
- Hormone panel (sex steroids)
- Radiographs
- Ultrasound
- Echocardiography
- Abdominal
- ECG
- Urinalysis

### **Distemper Vaccination**

- PureVax Ferret
- Merial
- Recombinant vaccine
- Fewer reactions, but still have some
- Subcutaneous, given subcutaneously, left side of body, varying sites

### **Vaccine Reaction Prevention**

- Give ferrets oral diphenhydramine (children's benadryl – no alcohol) 0.5-1 mL 20 minutes prior to vaccination
- Wait with ferret in office for 30 minutes post vaccination • Owner education
- If ferret had a reaction with FerVac, may have no problems with PureVax.
- Administer distemper & rabies at different visits – may be advisable

### **Vaccine Reaction**

- Usually within 30 minutes of receiving the vax:
- Dyspnea
- Hypersalivation, nausea, vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Erythematous skin
- Fever
- Seizure, convulsion, tremor

## **Vaccine Reaction - Treatment**

- Antihistamine: Diphenhydramine at 0.5-2.0 mg/kg IV or IM, Dexamethasone 0.25 mL (2 mg/ml) IM or SC
- If severe: epinephrine at 20 iu/kg IV, IM, SC, intratracheally
- Symptomatic:
  - Metaclopramide: 0.2-0.5 mg/kg SC or IM if retching, vomiting
  - Famotidine 2.5 mg SC
  - Sucralfate: 1/8 tablet or 0.25 mL PO
  - Diazepam : 1 mg/kg IM or IV or Midazolam if seizing
  - Fluids: Isotonic – 50-100 mL/kg SC, IV, IO
  - Vitamin K as needed if hemorrhage
  - Oxygen

## **Risk Management**

- If a ferret has had a reaction to distemper or rabies vaccine
- Next time – may do one at a time
- Evaluate risk of contracting distemper as to vaccine schedule
- Evaluate risk of rabies, legal requirements

## **Ferret Owner's Worries • To Think About:**

- End of life time
- Quality of Life Scale

## **Ferret Loss**

- Assessment of quality of life for aging, ailing, and terminally ill pets
- When is the right time? How will I know?
- Quality of Life Scale
- Caretakers can use this to ask themselves if they are able to provide enough help to maintain an ailing ferret in a humane way
- Quality of Life Scale
- Alleviate feelings of guilt and inadequacy
- End of life "Pawspice" Program
- Scale of 1 to 10, 10 being highest
- Address all needs
- HHHHMM scale
  - Hurt, Hunger
  - Hydration
  - Hygiene
  - Happiness
  - Mobility
  - More good days than bad

## Hurt

- Adequate Pain Control
- Ability to breathe properly (humans: ranked at top of pain scale)
- Pain control: oral, injectable
- Must be able to recognize signs of pain. Alleviation usually animal returns to normal activity

## Hydration

- Do they maintain on their own?
- Subcutaneous fluids
  - How often ◦ Adequate?
- Intravenous fluids
- Intraperitoneal
- Intraosseous

## Hygiene

- Is ferret keeping itself groomed?
- Can you keep it from lying in its own waste after it urinates, defecates?
- If oral cancer, disease, can't clean themselves – get quickly depressed
- Odor?

## Happiness

- Experience any joy or mental stimulation
  - Look in their eyes
  - The ferret knows what is going on
- Interacting with you like normal?
- Play?
- Enjoyment of petting, holding. Handling may cause pain if there is a tumor
- Depressed? Lonely? Anxious? Bored? Afraid?

## Mobility

- Move around on its own or with help to satisfy its desires
- Seizures? Stumbling? Severe weakness?
- Can it use litter box and keep itself from stepping in/falling in wastes?
- Can it get to the food, water?
- If prone, is someone there to change its position, rotate body every 2 hours?
  - Atelectasis, decubital ulcers have to be avoided

## More Good Days Than Bad

- Days in a row when ferret is "turned off" to life
- Bad days: undesirable experiences
  - Vomiting, nausea, diarrhea, frustration
  - Seizures, pain, profound weakness
  - Discomfort, problems associated with large abdominal mass
  
- HHHHHMM
  - Need to evaluate every few days or every couple of weeks if very ill
  - Need to put the ferret's quality of life above our own need:
  - Ask the tough question: are we keeping the ferret alive because the quality of life is ok or are we keeping the ferret alive because we refuse to let go – it hurts us.
  - Consider what chronic pain is like.
  - Euthanasia
  - May be far preferable to days/weeks of severe pain, HHHHHMM
  - Painless, gentle ending
  - Seizures, pain, coldness/fever, bleeding, loss of control of life and dignity
  - Ideal: die in sleep with none of the above.
  - Reality: most don't "go peacefully"
  - How to accept that we cannot have them live forever: do all we can; seek comfort with other ferrets, owners; trust the veterinarians

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