



## ANIMAL ANTICS

### THINKING OF KEEPING A PET FERRET?

**HISTORY.** Domestic pet ferrets (*Mustela putorius furo*) are thought to descend from the European polecat (weasel) and were first domesticated by the Ancient Egyptians. They are close relatives of skunks, minks, otters and badgers. Over 300 years ago they were introduced as working animals to hunt rabbits and rodents for the farmers to kill.

**COLOURATION/HOB/JILL/KITS.** Most common is the buff coloured fitch ferret with black masks, feet and tails. Albino ferrets are white with pink eyes. The male ferret is termed a “hob”; the female a “jill” and babies are “kits”. On average ferrets will live for 6-10 years. The female ferret has a gestation lasting 42 days with average litter sizes being 8.

**DO THEY SMELL?** Un-neutered ferrets, especially the males can get a bit strong on the nose, especially during the mating season. Other factors, such as how and where the ferret is kept, how often it's bedding and toilet areas are changed or washed, and also to some extent its diet will also affect the odour. Ferrets also have the ability to release a foul-smelling secretion if annoyed or frightened.

**DO THEY BITE?** Like cats, dogs and most other pets they have teeth and jaws and they use them to bite things, especially their food. Ferrets do have a tendency to 'explore the world with their mouths', but do not pose an unusual risk of biting.

**HOUSING.** Ferrets are very energetic and need plenty of room. A rabbit-hutch style cage is suitable for outdoor housing. The cage should be sturdy, draught proof and waterproof. It should have a separate sleeping area with a hole for access to the living area. Check the cage regularly for small holes and weak door latches, ferrets are excellent escape artists! If kept indoors, make sure your house is 'ferret-proofed'. Make sure that they cannot get into any places they shouldn't such as small holes, behind cabinets, on shelves, etc. and that they are kept away from anything breakable or dangerous.

**EXERCISE.** Ferrets get bored easily, so it's advisable to provide your ferret with a selection of toys to play with and items to climb in/on. If caged, ferrets should be let out daily to get exercise and to satisfy their curiosity. Whenever outside they should be closely supervised and preferably kept on a harness leash designed for ferrets. Collars will not work for ferrets because their heads are about the same width as their necks and can slip out easily.

**TRAINING.** Ferrets spend 14-18 hours a day sleeping but when awake they are very active, exploring their surroundings relentlessly. Ferrets are *crepuscular*, meaning animals which come out at twilight. Like kittens and puppies they require a lot of care and training at first. However, ferrets are intelligent and can quickly be trained - even to use a litter tray!

**OTHER PETS.** Ferrets are extremely social animals interacting with other ferrets happily. You can keep a lone ferret provided it receives lots of playtime and attention. Ferrets have been known to play with household cats and small non-aggressive dogs. However, great care must be taken when introducing ferrets to any new animal and never leave unsupervised with a child.

**DIET.** Ferrets are carnivorous, they eat meat not vegetables. They are *obligate* carnivores, meaning that they require a special diet that is mostly meat-based and contains between 32-38% protein and between 15-20% fat. Their natural diet consists of whole small prey meat like mice and rats, organs and raw bones. Some owners feed a fresh meat based diet; others use cat food with dry biscuits. Do not feed milk, or foods high in sugar or carbohydrates.

### COMMON AILMENTS

- Ferrets are very prone to canine (dog) distemper. Vaccinations are available from your veterinary surgery.
- Like us, ferrets can catch colds. A ferret can even catch a cold from us!
- Ferrets are sometimes bothered by fleas/ticks/mites.
- Although not an actual ailment, the odour of a ferret can be greatly reduced by 'descenting' (removal in part of anal sacs & ducts).
- Unless you have access to a neutered male ferret, it is essential that your female ferret is neutered as, if she is not 'mated' when she comes into season, she can be susceptible to infection/disease which can be fatal.

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