

# All About the FERRET



*by Oxford Ferret Rescue*

## What are Ferrets?

Ferrets are domestic animals and cousins of weasels, skunks, and otters. They are not rodents! They are friendly and make excellent pets. If you've never met one before, the easiest way to think of them is somewhere between dogs and cats in personality, but much smaller. Ferrets do not have good eyesight, they make up for this with their great sense of hearing and smell.

Each is unique in its personality and temperament. Some are cuddly, others more independent. Much depends on where they came from and how they were raised. Ferrets live an average of 6-8 years, and are considered senior citizens after age 3.

## What's good about ferrets as pets?

Ferrets are a lot of fun! They are very playful with each other and with you, even as they age. They can be very entertaining companions. They are also very inquisitive and remarkably determined, which is part of their charm but can also be a bit of a challenge.

They are friendly and bond with their owners. Ferrets can be trained to use a litter box and do tricks. Most of them love to go places with you, riding on a shoulder, or in a bag. They sleep a lot and don't particularly

mind being in a cage, but they do need time to run around and play for at least a few hours each day.

A single ferret won't be terribly lonely as long as they get plenty of attention from their human companion, however, the fun of watching 2 or 3 playing together might be worth the little extra trouble.

## What is the downside to owning a ferret as a pet?

- They require a lot of care and training for the first year.
- They are independent like cats but tend to be higher maintenance like dogs. They'll need more of your time and attention. Many aren't quite as good about litter pans as cats are, so you'll need to be patient.
- Ferrets possess their own distinct scent, which can bother some people. Most are descented but can still have a slight odor.
- Although most ferrets get along reasonably well with cats and dogs, this is not a guarantee. Be especially careful with the terrier breeds, who were bred for hunting. Ferrets might look like rodents to them!
- Ferretproofing!! Take this seriously. They like to get in to everything, so if they are out and about, make sure they cannot hurt themselves or your possessions. They have very flexible bodies and can fit through tiny spaces and holes (some as small as a quarter!).
- They also love to steal small (and not so small) objects. They like to chew on "spongy" items and swallow them. Ferrets like to dig in the dirt of potted houseplants, and scratch and dig carpeting.
- Finally, cost is an issue with regard to veterinary care. Most ferrets will require major surgery in their lifetime. Some examples are adrenalectomies, foreign object removal, splenectomies, hairball removal, biopsies, and others. They are also prone to a few chronic medical illnesses such as Inflammatory bowel disease, insulinomas, etc.



## What will I need to take care of my Ferret? FOOD:

*The key ingredients are fat and protein, specifically animal protein. Ferrets have very short digestive cycles, so vegetable proteins and high fiber diets are not good for them. Pick a diet that uses chicken, turkey, beef, or lamb. Most ferrets don't like fish, besides it will probably make the litter box smell worse. The diet should have 35% protein and 20% fat with animal protein being listed as one of the first ingredients. It should have no more than 3% fiber.*

*Unless your ferret is overweight, keep their bowls full to feed "free choice".*

*Some examples of recommended diets are: Superior Choice from Drs. Foster and Smith catalog, Totally Ferret for Active Ferrets, and Zupreem. You can find these at the bigger pet stores in the area.*

## SUPPLEMENTS:

*Ferretone and Linatone are similar vitamin supplements that ferrets consider a wonderful treat! They are similar and can be used interchangeably. Do not feed these in excess as they both contain Vit A, also they may cause diarrhea if given too much.*

*These “treats” are helpful distractions when trimming toenails.*

*[Laxatone](#) or [Petromalt](#), both feline hairball remedies, can help prevent hairball problems.*

*It is recommended to use them 1-2/ a week, up to daily during shedding season.*

*Sometimes, this can help pass small objects such as rubber bands, Styrofoam pieces, etc.*

*As with all treats and supplements, use in moderation.*

*Fruits are NOT recommended. These contain way too much sugar. “Totally Ferret” brand makes a good treat for these guys.*

## CAGES:

*Many people keep their ferrets in a cage or very well ferretproofed room when they cannot be supervised. This reduces the risk of ingesting foreign materials, and protects them from injury or escape. It is also a good way to start litter box training.*

*A metal mesh cage is probably your best choice, but if the floor is mesh, make sure you cover it with linoleum or plastic. The holes in the mesh can trap tiny toes. Aquarium enclosures are unacceptable. Cages with*

*wooden floors are also not a good idea, they soak up urine and are impossible to keep clean.*

*Generous cage size is important. Choose one that allows for 2 feet by 3 feet of space and 2 feet in height. This might be a bit tight though if you have more than 1 ferret. A cage with many levels and hammocks is even a better choice.*

*Some recommended cages are: Martins cages [www.martinscages.com](http://www.martinscages.com), Quality Care Cages, or Ferret Nation cages. The latter 2 being sold at the larger pet stores or shop for them on-line.*

*The bottom of the cage can be covered with linoleum squares, carpet samples, or cloth cage pads for easier cleaning. Be sure your cage door fastens securely, perhaps even with a small lock, because ferrets can be very determined and rather intelligent escape artists.*

*Most ferrets get bored easily when caged and sleep much of the time, so they probably won't get a whole lot of use out of toys in the enclosure. They would really rather be outside playing anyway.*

## LITTER ITEMS:

*You will certainly need more than 1 litter pan, particularly if you have a large home. Small size cat litter pans work just fine. For a travel cage or shoulder bag, you can use a Rubbermaid type plastic container. Make sure the sides of the pan are at least 4 inches high, since ferrets habitually back into corners to deposit their waste and you wouldn't want accidents over the sides. One side of the pan, though, should be no more than an inch or two high, so your ferret can get in and out easily. This is especially true for young kits.*

*Recommended litter pans are: Superpet large litter pans and Marshalls litter pans. These can be found at most major pet stores.*

*Use Yesterdays' News or Feline pine pellets for litter. Do not use the clay clumping varieties or cedar shavings.*

## BATHING AND GENERAL HYGIENE:

*Baths shouldn't be more frequent than every 2-3 weeks in warm weather and 6-8 weeks in the winter. Really, most only need to be bathed once or twice a year! Contrary to what you might expect, bathing will not rid them of their scent, in some cases, it may actually make it worse. Bathing often stimulates their skin to start producing extra oils to compensate, which makes their scent stronger. What does help to cut down odor is to change their bedding every few days and clean their litter pans daily. There are ferret shampoos on the market.*

*Most ferrets get very excited after they are done with a bath. Drying them off before they run off is a challenge. Some tricks are to put towels in a box and let them run in and around in it until they are dry, or to use terry cloth bathrobes and let them run through the sleeves, or just let them run loose in the bathroom with towels all over the floor and the door closed. Immediately after a bath, many ferrets "go nuts", bouncing and rolling around against everything possible to dry off. Grab your camera!*

*Ear cleaning is very important. They shouldn't need this more than once a month. Dampen a cotton swab with a ferret ear cleaner and gently swab. Do not use peroxide or water; wet ears are prone to infections. Yellow or brownish-red wax is normal. Black discharge may be a sign of an ear mite infestation. Your veterinarian can check for this and prescribe medication.*

*Trimming nails regularly is a good idea. Long nails can easily catch on things and ferrets may panic and hurt themselves trying to get free. There are a few ways to trim nails quickly and with minimal stress:*

- 1. If you are attempting this by yourself, put the ferret on its back and drip a few drops of Ferretone or Linatone on their stomach. The ferret will usually stay relatively still and lick at the spot.*
- 2. If you have help, have someone hold the ferret by the scruff of the neck and apply Ferretone on his/her fingers. Ferrets usually go limp while held in this manner and the "treat" will act as a distraction.*

*You want to cut the nail just a bit longer than the pink line (a blood vessel) inside the nail. If you cut this area by accident, use a styptic stick or Kwik-stop powder to stop bleeding.*

## TOYS:

*There are many good ferret toys available now, however, many cats toys will also suffice. Ferrets are tough on toys, be careful what you choose. Stay away from foamy ones since those break apart easily and can be ingested. Avoid superballs. Catnip won't hurt ferrets, but it doesn't affect them like it does cats. Remote control cars (under supervision!) are also popular.*

*Most ferrets enjoy playing in a "hammock", or a leg from an old pair of jeans will be fun to crawl through or nap in. Other ideas are tennis balls, golf balls, ping-pong balls, film canisters (rinsed to wash out any chemicals), old socks with bells rolled up in them. Paper shopping bags are fun to crawl in, watch out for the plastic bags though, ferrets can get caught and suffocate. Cardboard boxes are also fun, especially several nested together with ferret-sized holes cut in various places. Tubes and tunnels made of*

*plastic pipe, dryer hose, or drainage tubing are popular too. Avoid tubes from paper towels or toilet paper, they are small enough that ferrets can get their heads stuck in them.*

## FERRETPROOFING:

*Ferrets are naturally curious about everything. They love to squeeze into tiny places and small holes (in some cases the size of a quarter). This can be very dangerous. They can get behind a refrigerator, dryer, or other appliance. An often overlooked area is beneath the sink where the plumbing goes into the walls.*

*Before letting the ferret out to explore, it is a good idea to get on your stomach and look at the world as they do. Look for holes in and under cabinets. They can actually open cabinets and doors so safety latches are a good idea.*

*Be especially aware of your furniture. Recliners and sofas are favorite hiding places for ferrets. The springs and other moving parts are extremely dangerous. These are too difficult to ferretproof, except by putting them in a forbidden room.*

*Many ferrets are good climbers and jumpers. They will find a route to places you never thought they could reach (the third shelf of a set of bookcases!). Remove anything spongy from reach and put fragile items out of the way. Keep the toilet lid down in your bathroom. Ferrets often jump into the basin and are unable to get back out.*

*Keep household cleaners locked up. Ferrets have been known to drink them. Be particularly careful of pens, pencils, erasers, rubber door stops, styrofoam, silly putty, shoe insoles, even tennis shoe soles, and soap.*

*Specific individuals may have special ferretproofing needs, such as if one likes to eat paper or plastic bags, some like*



*to chew on electrical cords or plants.*

*Check your ferret's toys to make sure they are not beginning to crack or break apart. Double check the dishwasher, refrigerator, clothes washer and dryer before closing them or turning them on. Watch where you sit or walk, that chair, rug, or pile of laundry may be hiding a napping ferret.*

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