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## **Ferret: Care and Husbandry**

The ferret is a domestic carnivorous mammal, part of the Mustelidae or weasel family. Approximately 20 inches long and weighing about 2-4 pounds, these little critters have an average lifespan of 4-8 years.

For hundreds of years ferrets were mainly used for hunting or "ferreting". They were used because of their lean, long bodies and their inquisitive nature. They are very good at going down holes and chasing rabbits out of their burrows. It wasn't until the 1980's that ferrets became more popular as pets.

Ferrets are crepuscular meaning they are most active during dusk and dawn. They spend 14 to 18 hours a day sleeping. But don't let that fool you ferrets are very active and curious pets.

Ferrets have a very strong nesting instinct and carry small objects to hide. Ferrets will hide anything from toys, socks, keys, shoes, pencils, balls etc. Sometimes ferrets form attachments to certain objects and will repeatedly steal the same object.

Ferrets love to play games such as hide and seek and tug-of-war. They like to tear open packages and explore the contents and explore holes and pipes. They enjoy playing with toys but do get bored easily so make sure to switch the toys frequently. Safe toys can include hard plastic toys, ping pong balls, tennis balls, boxes and sturdy kitten balls. Rubber toys are not appropriate because they can be torn apart and ingested. Due to the very curious nature of ferrets, houses must be "ferret proofed" to prevent injury and escape. It is recommended that you use a kitten collar and bell to keep track of your ferret.

Ferrets can be successfully litter box trained, but they do have a natural instinct to spread their feces to scent a foraging territory. Thus, multiple litter boxes may be necessary and frequent litter changing is a must. Cat litter is not an appropriate litter choice for ferrets because their delicate mucous membranes make them very sensitive



to the dust. Cat litter also clumps and if ingested it may form intestinal impactions. Recycled paper materials are the best choice for litter. Ferrets should not be bathed frequently as this can remove natural oils from the ferret's coat and lead to dry skin. If the ferret must be bathed, ferret shampoo found at your local pet store is best. They also need their nails trimmed on a regular basis.

Ferrets are carnivores and have very high metabolic rates; they require a diet high in protein and fat and food should be available at all times. Commercial ferret diets are the best option. Kitten food may be used as long as it has high protein and high fat content. Avoid high sugar or carbohydrate treats such as raisins, bananas, peanut butter and cereal as these can cause pancreatic disease, obesity and other conditions.

Ferrets make great pets but you must keep in mind their potential to bite. Well socialized adult ferrets rarely bite. It is common for a ferret kit or baby to nip this is usually just an act of playfulness, curiosity, or teething. The bite of a ferret is very similar to a cat's bite and can be very painful.

Ferrets, like dogs and cats, need an annual checkup with a qualified veterinarian. Annual checkups are very important for the early detection of disease. Because of ferrets' high metabolisms, cancers and other diseases progress at a very fast rate; so, early detection is critical for successful treatment. Common diseases of the ferret include; adrenal disease, pancreatic tumors, lymphoma, heart disease and ADV which is similar to canine parvovirus. Ferrets are also prone to heat stroke so make sure to keep the temperature of their environment below 80 degrees Fahrenheit.

Ferrets are susceptible to many preventable diseases that also affect dogs and cats. Most states make rabies vaccination a legal requirement. Ferrets should also be vaccinated for canine distemper using a vaccine specifically formulated for ferrets. Young ferrets receive boosters at 8, 12, and 16 weeks of age and adults should be boosted annually. Along with your annual exam a fecal should be checked for intestinal parasites. A yearly heartworm test should be performed to ensure that your ferret has not contracted heartworm disease. Heartworm preventative such as Heartgard may also be administered.