

10 Tips for New Ferret Owners

1. Find a good veterinarian

A good ferret veterinarian is important for helping you keep your ferret healthy throughout his life. Ferrets require annual vaccinations against rabies and canine distemper. A new ferret should always be brought to a veterinarian for a checkup (your vet may want you to bring a stool sample). At that time you can discuss your ferret's vaccination schedule (baby ferrets require a series of vaccinations in order to be properly protected against distemper). Your veterinarian can demonstrate proper ear cleaning, nail clipping, and dental hygiene techniques.

2. Food and treats

Many high-quality ferret foods are now available. Remember that better nutrition will help your ferret have a longer and healthier life. Ferrets are carnivores, and their food should have meat as its main ingredient(s). We recommend offering multiple brands of food, especially for young ferrets (ferrets imprint on food very young and can be finicky eaters as adults), to help them learn to enjoy different foods (in case for some reason you are no longer able to get a certain brand). Offer food and water at all times. Very young ferrets need their food wet down for them until their teeth and jaws are ready for hard food. Treats are not a substitute for good food. Ferrets crave attention and will often even enjoy their regular food as a treat if you give it to them by hand.

3. Litter-box training

Ferrets can be trained to use litter boxes, providing that you put in the effort. Ferrets naturally like to go in the same spot they went before, they prefer to back into corners, and they like to avoid going places where they eat, drink, sleep, or play. You can encourage good litter box use by (1) providing enough litter boxes in their cage and in the rooms that they play in (ferrets don't generally want to go too far once they decide the need a litter box) and (2) discouraging them from going in "wrong" places by putting down food bowls, sleeping blankets, or toys. Start by allowing your ferret in a small area with a litter box and

expand your ferret's roaming area as he displays good litter box use.

4. Grooming

Ferrets are basically clean creatures, but they do require some grooming help. They require regular ear cleaning and nail clipping. Ferret-specific ear cleaning solutions are available. Nail clipping can be done much more easily if you distract the ferret (placing a lickable treat on the belly works wonders — clip the nails while he licks it off). Ferrets can be bathed when they get dirty; however, bathing too frequently will only cause them to produce more of their natural oils (which will make them smell muskier). Ferrets shed their coats (and gain or lose weight) twice a year. When your ferret is shedding, administer a hairball remedy to help him pass any fur he swallows.

5. Odor control

Ferrets naturally have a musky ferret smell (which many owners find quite pleasant — if you object to the smell, then ferrets may not be right for you). There are other smells which you will want to reduce. Keeping litter boxes clean (scoop daily and wash regularly) and washing bedding will help reduce odors. Also make sure that the ferret's ears are regularly cleaned (ear wax can smell bad). Ferrets that are not neutered or spayed will smell stronger than those that are (most ferrets sold in pet stores are already altered).

6. Nip training and socializing

Ferrets are social animals; they want to play with you. They are very smart and can learn to play properly *if you expect it of them*. Ferrets don't have hands, so they use their mouths to grab things. They play with each other by mock combat; you must teach them that playing with humans is not like playing with other ferrets. They will learn this if you are gentle and consistent with teaching them. Mother ferrets grab their kits by the scruff of the neck to discipline them — you can do the same. Do not hit your ferret, but rather work gently with him so that he can understand what you want. Offer lickable treats from your hands so that your ferret learns that licking you is a pleasant experience. Offer your ferret toys to play roughly with if he wants to.

Work with your ferret's natural desires — when he first wakes up he wants to run around and play, when he is tired he wants to curl up and snuggle.

Playing with your ferret and getting him used to having his feet held and teeth examined while he is young will make grooming easier when he is older.

7. Housing

For their protection, we recommend that ferrets be caged when you aren't around to supervise their play (their curiosity can get them into dangerous situations they can't necessarily get out of). Your ferret's cage should be a safe haven, with food, water, litter

box(es), and sleeping blankets or hammocks available. Ferrets should have a wire cage (no fish tanks) with a floor covered with material to protect their feet. Since ferrets use a litter box, there is no need for wood chips/shavings in their cage — instead provide bedding blankets made from old sweatshirts, T-shirts, etc.

8. Ferret proofing

Ferrets are very curious and intelligent. They especially like problem solving — which means problem creating for you. They will try to figure out how to climb things, get into things, and get under things. Ferret proofing is the ongoing process of getting down to their level and making sure that there isn't anything harmful or dangerous that they could get into. A common serious ferret problem is intestinal blockages caused by swallowing something that can't fit through their digestive tract. Protect your ferret by monitoring what he is playing with and making sure he isn't accidentally chewing off any pieces.

9. Play and intellectual stimulation

Ferrets are highly intelligent animals that require daily play time and intellectual stimulation. This means that they need exercise and they need you to play with them every day. Ferrets appreciate toys as simple as an empty box or a dangling towel. By providing your ferret with intellectual stimulation you will help prevent him from exhibiting bad behaviors due to stress or boredom. The amount of play a ferret requires depends on his age and health; young ferrets can require several hours a day, as they get older they slow down and don't run around as much.

10. Respect

Ferrets are living creatures. Consider getting a ferret to be like adopting a child. They need to be taught right from wrong, they will make mistakes, they need affection and attention, they feel fear and pain, they want to play, and so much more. If you care for them and appreciate both their good points and their faults, they will be loving and amusing companions that are unlike any other animal.

NOTE: One of the benefits of the growing popularity of ferrets is the proliferation of ferret-specific products. In the past, ferret owners often had to make do with using cat or dog products. The advantage of ferret-specific products is that they come with directions on how to properly use them.

Good reference articles (issue #, page #) from past issues of *Modern Ferret*:

- #9, pg 12 - Equipping a cage
- #12, pg 44 - Bathing
- #6, pg 30 - Ear cleaning
- #9, pg 34 - Nip Training
- #14, pgs 17, 20, 22 - Litter training
- #16, pg 44 - Preventing boredom

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