

Ferret Wellness Management and Environmental Enrichment



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KEYWORDS

• Ferret • Wellness • Disease prevention • Enrichment • Training

KEY POINTS

- Ferrets are a commonly kept companion mammal with specific husbandry and medical requirements for the maintenance of optimum health.
- Veterinarians have the opportunity to assist and advise ferret owners to best provide for their pet's needs.
- Psychological enrichment may be provided in many forms to maximize pet ferrets' overall health and well-being.

INTRODUCTION

Ferrets have been kept as companion animals for centuries. As intelligent, gregarious, socially engaging animals with a high metabolic rate and a propensity to develop serious, expensive disease processes, veterinarians owe it to them to assist owners in providing the best preventative care possible. The focus of this article is to provide veterinarians with the most up-to-date information to empower owners to provide an excellent quality of life for their ferrets in all stages of life.

LEGAL ASPECTS SPECIFIC TO FERRET OWNERSHIP

Ferrets are the most highly regulated of all common exotic small mammal pet species. Due to their potential as both a rabies vector and an invasive species in the United States, they are illegal in some states, counties, and municipalities. Clients should be advised to check their local laws and ordinances, preferably prior to acquisition!¹ Owner heartbreak aside, confiscation and shelter placement can have dire consequences for ferrets. Veterinarians may be able to act on behalf of owners in acquiring

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an exception under an exotic pet ordinance, but this should first include a frank discussion regarding the potential consequences if a petition is not successful. Furthermore, some state veterinary practice acts prohibit veterinarians from providing care for illegal pets and may require reporting of such by a veterinarian. Owners need to be advised that an illegal carnivore that bites a visitor to a home will face an unfortunate end should the bite be reported, regardless of vaccination status.

BASIC HUSBANDRY

Housing

Various housing options are possible for pet ferrets. If properly acclimated, they can thrive indoors, outdoors, or in a combination of both in most climates.² It is not advisable to allow ferrets to roam freely in the home. Their curiosity level, combined with a small, flexible, tubular-shaped body, enables them to both gain access to and escape from areas that pose little to no concern with many other pet species. They, therefore, should be housed in a secure, appropriate cage or enclosure and should only be allowed to roam outside the enclosure in a ferret-proofed area while under close supervision. Ferrets are especially fond of crawling into furniture and piles of laundry and seem to have a predilection for soft rubber items.^{1,3} The author has treated many cases of “ferret versus recliner,” clothes dryer–associated heatstroke, and television remote button ingestion. Ferrets are also not suitable for young children due to their ability to inflict a severe bite and the risk of blunt trauma from not-so-gentle handling.³

Examples of suitable indoor ferret housing are shown in **Figs. 1** and **2**. Multiple levels and vertical climbing options are suitable for younger ferrets. Older ferrets or those with medical conditions, rendering them less active or at risk of injury from routine play-related falls, should be allocated more horizontal space on a single level.

Commercial hutches or owner-constructed housing may be provided for keeping ferrets outdoors. As with any other species, enclosures must be escape-proof and adequately protect ferrets from predators and adverse weather conditions. Optimal environmental conditions include temperatures of 40°F to 77°F (4°C–25°C), humidity 40% to 60%, and 12 to 16 hours of daylight.^{1,4}

Ferrets need a denning area and, in particular, appreciate hammock-style sleeping quarters. There are various commercial items to serve this purpose, although many owners choose to make their own. Ferrets tend to prefer warmth-retention fabrics, such as fleece. A simple, inexpensive hammock can be made with a hanging file frame (**Fig. 3**).

Most ferrets can be trained to use litter boxes. Litter boxes are most successful when placed in corners and cleaned frequently. For ferrets that would rather play in the litter or shove the litter box away from the corner, commercial potty pads placed in corners that ferrets have shown predilection for may be more successful. Owners should be advised that ferrets likely have a preference as to which corner(s) to use, and willingness to compromise on the part of owners results in less frustration for both parties.

Dietary

Dietary management is perhaps the most controversial issue in terms of overall wellness management of ferrets. Ferrets are obligate carnivores, with a very short digestive tract, lacking a cecum and ileocolic valve, resulting in a limited absorptive capacity and a need for a highly digestible diet consisting of high-quality animal protein and fat, with minimal carbohydrate and fiber.^{5,6} Most sources advise 30% to 40% protein, 15% to 20% fat, and minimal fiber, offered free choice for most ferrets.^{1,5}

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