

# Caring For Your Ferret



An owner's guide to caring for ferrets

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# Introducing Ferrets

This information booklet and useful guide provides tips on how to care for your ferret. It includes topics such as the history of ferrets, feeding advice, housing and care as well as common illnesses and ailments.

## Ferret History

Ferrets are from the family called 'Mustelidae' and are closely related to otters, badgers, skunks, minks, sables and weasels. Ferrets are also known as 'Mustela putorius furo', which in Latin means 'bad smelling weasel'.

Ferrets were domesticated long ago but we are unsure of when this first came about. It has been documented that the Romans brought ferrets to Britain in the 1st century. However they were not recognised until the 11th century when the Normans brought them to use for rodent control.

Ferrets were mainly used as a form of rabbit control on large estates. It wasn't until the late 1960s that ferrets became popular as pets. Now the range of different colour ferrets is large. The ferret has become such a popular pet and show animal that the colours have extended from the albino, polecat and various crosses to a wide spectrum of colours today.

Ferrets are increasingly becoming more and more recognised as a pet and gone are the days when a ferret was fed bread and milk and kept at the bottom of the garden.

Working ferrets are still popular and are the most humane form of rabbit control. However ferreting nearly took a disastrous turn when myxomatosis was introduced into the rabbit population and it killed over 95% of wild rabbits.



*Alpha Feeds is proud to sponsor Simon Whitehead of Pakefield Ferrets. Simon is well known as the author of Ferreting - An Essential Guide, and he also writes for a number of country sports magazines.*

# Ferrets As Pets

Ferrets make great pets and companions and with the right care and feeding regime they can live up to 12 years. They are well known for having powerful, distinct and engaging personalities, along with their playful behaviour.

Young ferrets are known as kits and they can go through a stage of testing their teeth, but with lots of daily handling and plenty of treats they soon stop nipping.

With the right care, ferrets can become a bundle of fun and will play with toys, chase balls and have fun racing around. They love tunnels that they can run in and out of and hide in. In groups, ferrets will spend most of their waking hours play fighting, dancing, and chasing each other.

The ferret is an extremely clean almost fussy animal and will only use one corner or place to go to the toilet. Ferrets can sleep up to 20 hours a day or more and whilst they are not nocturnal, they are generally active at dawn and dusk, in the wild this would probably be their optimum hunting time.

Ferrets sometimes do have an awful smell but this only happens when a ferret is very frightened. Similar to skunks they can produce a disgusting smell from their anal gland. However, the smell does disperse after a short while and is not harmful. Ferrets also tend to smell in spring when it is breeding season, the male (hob) secretes a musky smell that the females (jills) find attractive.



# Looking After Your Ferret

## Living Arrangements

Ferrets need to be kept in the correct living environment. They need a good constant supply of water and a food bowl in an accessible place.

It is important that any housing you may purchase for your ferret is escape proof, easy to clean, has a separate sleeping area, and enough room for your ferret to exercise.

They need a place to go to the toilet. A litter tray is ideal for keeping the cage clean and hygienic. It should be regularly emptied to prevent odour building up and stop your ferret becoming dirty and smelly.

Nice warm sleeping quarters are a must for ferrets, they come in all shapes and sizes from hammocks to baskets with soft fleecy blankets to ferret sized nesting boxes and fleecy sleeping bags or pouches. A group of ferrets will curl up together in one sleeping place.

Ferrets can stand cold weather, high winds, rain and snow provided they have a warm and dry sleeping area with plenty of warm bedding. If a ferret becomes very hot though they can suffer from heat exhaustion and subsequently die as they are not very good at regulating their temperature.

## Handling & Care

When handling your ferret it is important to make your ferret feel comfortable and secure. It is best to hold them under their front legs. With young ferrets they need handling regularly so they build up a bond with you. Once you have built up that trust and they are relaxed most ferrets will lay in the crook of the arm and will even fall asleep on your lap.

It is important to remember that ferrets are natural diggers, curious, and great escape artists; they can quite easily open doors that are not shut properly.

It is also important to check your ferrets' claws, the front claws grow very quickly because they are used for digging. Your ferret will probably not get much chance to wear them down by digging so it is up to you to clip their claws. Ferrets ears should be checked regularly and need a small amount of maintenance because of they are prone to wax building up. This can occasionally lead to ear mite infections.

## Play Time

As ferrets are extremely playful and active, it is important to spend time socialising with them and entertaining them. They need plenty of variety and stimulation to prevent boredom and can be taken for walks using a ferret harness.

They love playing with small balls and tubes that can be used as tunnels. There are many accessories out on the market but if you are creative you can make your own versions using household items or items from the shed.

## Seasons, Mating & Neutering

The physical signs of a ferret in season are obvious. The hob is usually first; his testicles will drop along with an increase in his aroma. The jill's vulva will swell and will stay in season until mated, injected or naturally around September time they will come out of season. The breeding season of the ferret is governed by the hours of daylight over the hours of darkness (photoperiodism). Both sexes will exhibit different characteristics due to the hormone imbalance. The first mating is usually around March/April time with the pregnancy lasting 42-44 days.

One of the many old wives tales connected to ferret breeding states that if you don't breed from your jill she would die. The act of mating (coitus) stops the build up of oestrogen; it is this act and not the birth of the litter that removes the ferret from her season. If you do not want a litter, you can remove the jill from her season by using a vasectomised hob ferret (hoblet). If a hoblet is not available a jill-jab is available from the veterinary surgeon and this will have the same effect.

Neutering of any animal is a guaranteed way of preventing any unwanted litters, fights between inmates and reducing the aroma of the summertime hob. Neutered hobs (hobbles) can be kept with each other and with jills for the full year without the usual play fighting.

With the increased awareness of the importance of the jills season, the use of a vasectomised hob is becoming the popular way of removing the Jill from her season. After a simple operation and a quarantine time of around 6 weeks, this hoblet can remove a lot of jills from their seasons during the summer months, proving a lot more cost effective than using the Jill-jab from the vets.

# Looking After Your Ferret

## Feeding & Nutrition

Ferrets, like most animals have their own specific dietary requirements. They are obligate carnivores and their good health depends on the quality of their diet.

They have such a rapid metabolism and wake up to eat about every four hours. Fresh water and food should always be readily available for them.

Cat and dog foods are inappropriate for ferrets and should not be fed under any circumstances.

Ferrets require a concentrated diet to receive all the calories and nutrients they need to stay fit and healthy as they never eat huge amounts in one go. A ferret's diet should be high in protein and energy, and low in fibre.

It is important to feed your ferret correctly from an early age.

Feeding a high quality dry ferret food is ideal for keeping teeth clean and can make their faeces less smelly.

Be aware that some feeds contain high quantities of fish oil and by-products. These types of feed are soft and can cause plaque and tartar to build up on your ferret's teeth.

It is also important to know that vitamin supplements are not necessary if the ferrets are fed a high quality food. However, many ferrets love 'Linatone' and it is an excellent treat for good behaviour or as a distraction when it comes to clipping nails.

If a fresh food is fed then there may be the need to supplement with vitamins and minerals which can be tricky to calculate deficiencies or toxicities.

A carbohydrate rich diet is not needed by ferrets and they are considered to be more likely to develop insulinoma, which is cancer of the pancreas if they have too much carbohydrate. However, oil content in feed is essential for healthy skin and a shiny coat, along with calcium and phosphorous to ensure healthy gums and teeth.

Always make sure there is a constant supply of water especially if you feed a dry pellet food as they will drink three times the volume of pellets eaten and in warm weather they will drink more. In cold weather a sock over the water bottle will help prevent freezing.



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# Looking After Your Ferret

## Alpha Ferret Feast

Alpha Ferret Feast is a premium complete diet which meets all the nutritional needs of working, pet and show ferrets.

Ferret Feast provides the ideal way to feed ferrets throughout all their life stages, giving them a well balanced diet to keep them in optimum condition.

The crunchy, extruded nuggets contain the highest quality chicken and fish proteins and high oil content for healthy skin and a shiny coat.

Scientifically formulated for health and vitality, Ferret Feast is highly palatable and easy to digest.

Not only is it very easy to feed, but it removes the odour of more traditional feeding regimes and contains all the necessary vitamins and minerals that ferrets need to remain in the very best of health.

Ferret Feast contains 36% protein and only natural ingredients, oils, calcium and phosphorus to give healthy teeth and gums and excellent general well being.

Ferret Feast is available in 2.5kg and 10kg bags.





## Feeding Guide:

- Alpha Ferret Feast should be fed ad lib to ferrets as they have a very fast metabolism
- If a ferret becomes overweight, either increase its activity levels or reduce the amount of food to 5% of the ferret's body weight
- When introducing Alpha Ferret Feast to Kits, moisten with warm water until soft and allow to cool before feeding
- Remove any uneaten moistened food after a few hours and replace it with fresh
- Gradually introduce Kits to dry food after 5-6 weeks.

### Ingredients:

*Poultry Meat Meal (min 26%), Whole Wheat, Fish Meal (min 15%), Whole Maize, Poultry Fat, Prairie Meal, Brewers Yeast, Beet Pulp, Whole Linseed, Minerals & Vitamins, Ext. of Yucca Schidigera EC permitted preservatives. NO artificial colourants or flavours.*



### Typical Analysis:

Protein	36%
Oil	19%
Fibre	2%
Ash	8%
Vitamin A	24,000 iu/kg
Vitamin D3	1,300 iu/kg
Vitamin E	150 iu/kg as alpha tocopherol
Copper	15 mg/kg as cupric sulphate

# Common Illnesses

Ferrets should be checked on a daily basis for signs of illness. Look for abnormal behaviour, discharges and lack of appetite.

It is up to each individual owner as to whether their ferrets are vaccinated for distemper or not. However regular visits to the vet will ensure your furry friend is fit and healthy.

## Hairballs & Blockages

Ferrets like to chew and can get blockages from almost anything, pieces of rubber, plastic, dried fruit, litter or bedding. They can also get hairballs from cleaning themselves and this is more of a risk when they are shedding because there is so much loose hair.

Coughing, loss of appetite, apparent difficulty in passing faeces or thin to no faeces, pawing at the mouth, and vomiting are all indications of a blockage.

Laxatives are good to use to help pass anything that doesn't belong inside your ferret. However if the object is too large, it will not pass. At this point you will need to see your vet immediately for surgery to remove the foreign object.

## The Flu

Just like humans, ferrets are also susceptible to the flu. However ferrets have to "ride out" these illnesses as there are no cures available.

Some of the symptoms of a cold or the flu in a ferret include sneezing, coughing, runny nose and eyes, a fever, lethargy, wheezing, diarrhoea, and loss of appetite.

If your ferret is suffering from flu offer supportive care and make sure your ferret drinks plenty of fluid and that they do not stop eating or passing faeces.

Track the number of days your ferret is sick and if the symptoms persist for longer than 5 - 7 days or if your ferret stops eating, drinking or passing faeces, take your ferret to a vet immediately.



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# Common Illnesses

## Parasites

Ear mites, ticks, fleas and worms are commonly found in ferrets and need to be treated straight away.

Ear mites are a nuisance and microscopic, and when in a ferret's ears, they appear as a dark reddish-brown/black discharge. Simple cleaning will not get rid of ear mites your vet will need to recommend you an effective product.

Fleas are easy to catch and difficult to get rid of. Once they find a host to provide their nourishment, they take up residence in your ferret's bedding, the carpet, your furniture, and any other place where they can hide and still have access to their food supply, you and your pets.

A ferret with fleas may itch more than normal. If you find fleas on your ferret, it is important to get them taken care of quickly. An untreated flea infestation can cause your ferret to become anaemic and may even be fatal.

It is important not to use flea products that are labeled for other animals. Your best bet is to contact your veterinarian and get flea medication from him. Some of the new flea medicines on the market take only one drop per application and will kill all fleas and eggs present on the ferret.

You must also clean the cage and bedding, as well as the rest of your house. Usually the complete sanitization of the cage and vacuuming of the rest of the carpets and furniture will adequately deal with the problem.

Ticks can carry Lyme Disease so it is important to remove the tick as quickly as possible. Ticks are difficult to find on your ferret, but easy to remove if done properly. Grasp the tick as close to the ferret's skin as possible with a pair of tweezers. Hold the tick firmly with the tweezers and gently pull the tick from the skin being careful to remove all of the mouth parts.

Ringworm is caused not by a worm as the name implies but rather by a fungus. This fungus causes almost perfectly round patches of flaky or oozing skin to occur. Other symptoms include alopecia (hairloss), itching and thickened, red, crusty skin.

The only positive way to identify if a skin irritation is ringworm is with a culture done by your vet of the effected skin and hair in the area. This fungus is highly contagious not just to your other ferrets but to other animals in your house and to you and your family, although the most susceptible include the young, old, and the ill.

This condition is treatable with topical medications, shampoos and sometimes an oral medication. The only way to be really rid of the fungus and its spores is to follow the vet's instructions exactly and to be sure to completely disinfect the entire area that may have been contaminated.

If you are unsure please consult your vet for the best form of advice and treatment.



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# Important Information

Ferrets Name: .....

D.O.B: .....

Veterinary Centre: .....

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Vaccinations:

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# A heritage in healthy feed

Alpha Feeds benefits from decades of experience in the formulation and production of high performance feeding ranges. The company is part of an independent, family owned business with over 100 years of trading heritage.

Based in Nottinghamshire, Alpha invests heavily in its research and manufacturing capability and takes great pride in the exceptional quality, and value, of its products.

## Alpha in the community

Alpha Feeds is a proud sponsor of ferret shows and Simon Whitehead of Pakefield Ferrets as well as dog shows, working tests, agility competitions, greyhound tracks and field trials throughout the UK.

These events provide our development team with valuable insight and feedback from customers that helps us further refine our quality product range.

Alpha Feeds support and work alongside organisations that re-home retired competition dogs.

## Where to buy Alpha

You'll find the Alpha range of dog food and Ferret Feast in all good pet food retailers, feed suppliers, agricultural merchants and country stores. For a free sample please contact our **Consumer Hotline** on **01427 880 914** or email [info@alphafeeds.com](mailto:info@alphafeeds.com)



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