

What are ferrets? Are they good pets?

Ferrets are domestic cousins of weasels and otters. They don't exist in the wild at all. (The endangered black-footed ferret is a completely different species.) They are friendly and make excellent pets. If you've never met one before, the easiest way to think of them is somewhere between cats and dogs in personality. Some are cuddly, others more independent. Ferrets are very playful, and they don't lose much of that playfulness as they get older. They are smart, and very inquisitive and determined, which is part of their charm but can also be a bit of a bother.

Like kittens and puppies, ferret kits require a lot of care and training at first. Also, although ferrets are generally less destructive than cats, they love to get into *everything*. If you're not willing to take the necessary time to protect your property and your pet, a ferret may not be for you.

Ferrets and children

Of course, it's necessary to monitor interactions between young children and *any* pets closely, and to make sure children know the proper way to handle pets. Many people have both children and ferrets without problems, but there's a difference between having both children and pets, and getting a pet for your child. If your child is responsible, careful, and not too young, and you're willing to supervise and help with the care, a ferret will be a great pet. It's important to remember that a ferret is a lot like a cat or dog, and will require the same kind of attention and care.

Ferrets and other pets

Most dogs and cats can learn to get along with ferrets, although it does take time, and some just never work out their differences. If you want to try it, introduce them very *slowly*, over the course of several weeks, and be prepared to keep them separated permanently if necessary. You may have more luck with a kitten or puppy, but not necessarily. Most ferrets don't get along with birds, rabbits, rodents (hamsters, mice, etc.), lizard, and so on, though there are exceptions.

Where to get a ferret

Many pet stores have ferrets, and there are sometimes ads in the newspaper placed by small breeders with kits to sell or people who want to sell older ferrets. You can also find "rescue" ferrets at a local ferret shelter, which is often the least expensive choice. (Many humane societies don't keep ferrets, turning them over to a ferret shelter instead.) The shelter director should be able to tell you about each ferret's personality and habits, and help you pick the right ferret for you.

Ferretproofing your home

Ferrets love to get into trouble. The first line of defense, both for your ferrets and for your possessions, is a well-ferretproofed home.

Crawl around on your stomach to look for holes (as small as 2 X 2 inches) near the floor and under cabinets, especially in the kitchen and laundry area, and block them with wire mesh or wood. (Be sure to leave ventilation around appliances.) Recliners and sofa-beds are very dangerous; many ferrets have been crushed in the levers and springs underneath. Even regular couches can be dangerous if the ferret digs or crawls into the springs or stuffing. Many ferrets are good climbers and jumpers, and they excel at finding complicated routes to off-limits places. They can also open cabinets and climb into some drawers from underneath. Be particularly careful with sponges, erasers, rubber balls, foam earplugs, and anything else spongy or springy. Ferrets love to chew on that kind of thing, and swallowed bits can cause intestinal blockages. Toilet paper and paper towel rolls are a problem because ferrets get their heads stuck in them, and you might want to cut a slit in the bottom of any plastic bags your ferrets play with.

Finally, once your home is done, it's important to keep it safe. Watch your ferret's toys to make sure they don't crack or break apart, and keep in mind that you can be dangerous to your ferret, too. Always double-check your dishwasher, refrigerator, clothes washer and dryer before closing them or turning them on, and watch where you sit and walk: that lump might hide a napping ferret!

Training

Litter pans: Start your ferret out in a small area. Keep a little dirty litter in his pan at first, to mark it as a bathroom and to keep him from digging in it. Ferrets back into corners to leave their wastes, and most of them won't mess up their beds or food, so put ferret-scented towels or food bowls in all the non-litter corners at first. They generally use their pans within fifteen minutes of waking up, so make sure yours goes before you let him out. When he's out running around for playtime, keep a close eye on him. Put him in his litter pan every half hour or so, or whenever you see him start to back into a corner. Whenever your ferret uses a litter pan, give him lots of praise and a little treat right away. Within a few days, your ferret will probably be faking using the pan, just to get out of the cage or get a treat. That's okay; at least he's getting the idea. Treats and praise will work much better than any punishment, and consistency and immediacy are very important.

Nipping: Ferrets play roughly with each other, and like puppies and kittens, ferret kits won't know how hard they can play without hurting you. Again, treats and praise will work better than punishment, but if you need one, confining the misbehaving ferret to a cage and ignoring him for a few minutes can be very effective. You can try pushing a finger into the ferret's mouth (sideways, behind the back teeth) or holding his mouth open from behind (being careful not to choke him) immediately after a bite. You can also cover your hands with Bitter Apple so nipping tastes bad.

Vaccinations

Canine distemper: Fervac-D vaccine at 8, 12 and 16 weeks old, then a yearly booster shot. Galaxy-D is an acceptable third choice. Although rabies gets more press, canine distemper is much more dangerous to your ferret.

Rabies: Imrab-3 at 14 weeks, then boosters yearly, separated from the distemper vaccines by 2-3 weeks to reduce the chance of an adverse reaction. This is the only approved rabies vaccine.

Feeding your ferret

Most people feed their ferrets high-quality dry cat food, such as Iams, Science Diet, or ProPlan, or a good ferret food such as Totally Ferret. High-quality food may cost a bit more, but your pet will be much healthier and eat a lot less, so it really isn't more expensive. Soft cat food is not good for ferrets' teeth, and dog food doesn't have all the nutrients ferrets need. If you decide to use a ferret food, check its label just as carefully as you would for cat food. The key ingredients are fat and protein, specifically animal protein (meat). Ferrets can't digest vegetable proteins (grains) well. The food needs to have 30-35% protein and 15-20% fat, and meat products should be the first ingredient and at least two or three of the next few.

Healthy ferrets don't overeat. Keep your ferret's bowl full and let her eat as much as she wants.

It's also a good idea to give your ferret a cat laxative/hairball preventative, especially during shedding season in the spring and fall.

Cages

Many people keep their ferrets in a cage or very well ferretproofed room whenever they can't be supervised. However, even if you plan to let your ferrets have the run of the house all the time, you'll want a cage at first for training, as well as for temporary use. If you keep your ferret caged much of the day, the cage should be *at least* 2 X 3 feet and 2 feet high, for up to three ferrets. If you'll only be using the cage temporarily, such as when you're vacuuming or taking your pet on a weekend trip, 1 X 2 X 1 feet is big enough. Don't use an aquarium tank; it doesn't have enough ventilation. No matter how big your cage is, your ferret(s) will need several hours of free play time every day.

Your ferret's cage will need at least food, water, a litter pan, and old shirts or towels for bedding. Hammocks are very popular. Just be sure nothing in your ferret's cage could hurt him by catching a toe, being chewed, or some other way. Don't use any kind of wood chips, since they produce oils and dust that irritate the skin and lungs.

Where to get more information

Your local ferret club or shelter should be able to provide you with all the information and advice you could want. To find a ferret association, check the phone book, ask a veterinarian or pet store, or look at the list at Ferret Central (below).

A number of books also exist, most of which are excellent references and guides.

An extensive index of ferret information, advice, photos and anecdotes, including the Ferret Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ), can be found on the World Wide Web at Ferret Central,

<http://www.ferretcentral.org/>

The author of this brochure can be reached by email at <pamg@alumni.rice.edu>.

Please note: I am not a ferret expert, and I did not write, nor did I independently verify, all the information in this pamphlet. I have done my best to include only accurate and useful information, but I cannot guarantee that what is contained here, whether written by me or by a contributor, is correct, or even that following the advice herein won't be harmful to you or your ferret in some way. For advice from an expert, you may wish to consult one of the several books available, or, especially in the case of a suspected medical problem, a veterinarian who is familiar with the treatment of ferrets.

This pamphlet was derived from the Internet Ferret Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) and is provided as a service to ferret owners and others interested in ferrets as pets. The author is not affiliated with or responsible for the actions of any individual or organization that may choose to distribute it.

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A brief guide for owners
and anyone interested in
ferrets as pets