

Diseases in Ferrets

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Medical Conditions, Surgical Conditions, Pet Services
What are some of the common diseases of pet ferrets?

Common conditions of pet ferrets include diarrhea, intestinal foreign bodies, parasites, heart disease, and various kinds of tumors.

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What are the signs of these diseases?

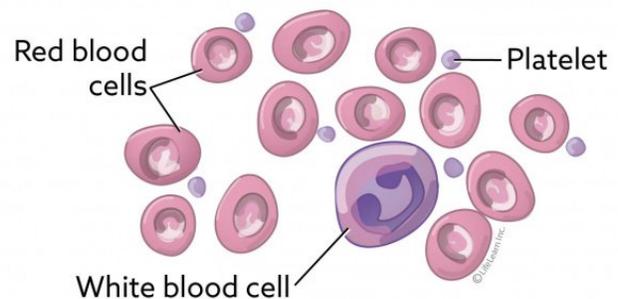
Diarrhea: Diarrhea is not a disease, per se, but rather a sign of a gastrointestinal problem. Diarrhea is liquid feces. In the ferret, the feces may be dark colored, green, mucousy, slimy, grainy, profuse or scant, depending on the cause. Ferrets with diarrhea may not appear to be visibly sick at all, or they may show lack of appetite, vomiting, weight loss, weakness, lethargy, and/or dehydration. In ferrets, several conditions can result in diarrhea. Internal parasites, such as *Coccidia* and *Giardia*, can cause diarrhea, as can viruses such as rotavirus (seen in young ferrets in North America), epizootic catarrhal enteritis (ECE, which is becoming more common in ferrets, typically in either very young or old ferrets) and, sometimes, human influenza or canine distemper (fatal in ferrets). Some bacteria, such as *Helicobacter musteli* (a spiral-type of bacteria), *Salmonella*, *Campylobacter* (the cause of proliferative colitis in ferrets) and clostridia, can cause diarrhea in ferrets. *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter* are important zoonotic (can spread to humans) diseases.

Intestinal Foreign Bodies: Foreign object ingestion is a common problem in ferrets, especially young ferrets less than one year old. Ferrets love to chew, so **ALL FOAM, PLASTIC, and RUBBER** objects **MUST** be kept out of their reach, including shoe inserts, ear plugs, kids' toys, pet toys, erasers, rubber bands, balloons, speaker foam, headphone foam, swim goggle liners, etc. If a ferret swallows one of these objects, it can cause a gastrointestinal obstruction (blockage), which will require a complicated exploratory surgery to remove, and that can be life-threatening. These obstructions can be difficult to diagnose unless the owner observes the ferret swallowing the object or notices a piece of the object missing. Many foreign bodies are hard to identify on routine X-rays. Common signs of foreign object ingestion are the same as many other ferret diseases and include lack of appetite, vomiting, lethargy, diarrhea, and progressive weight loss. Vomiting of a severe, projectile nature is suggestive of a complete obstruction.

Parasites: Like dogs and cats, ferrets can contract various intestinal parasites, as well as external parasites such as fleas. Yearly microscopic fecal examinations will allow

easy diagnosis and treatment. External parasites, such as fleas, ticks, mange, and ear mites, can also infect ferrets and can be treated with both topical and injectable medications.

Tumors or Cancer: Ferrets commonly develop cancer and early in life. Since early detection is critical to survival, every ferret should have at least yearly examinations; ferrets over the age of three years should have a geriatric screening at least annually. This screening includes a complete blood



count and chemistry profile, X-rays of the chest and abdomen, urinalysis, and an ECG (electrocardiogram). There are several types of cancer commonly seen in pet ferrets, including cancer of the pancreas (called insulinoma), adrenal gland tumors, mast cell tumors of the skin, and lymphosarcoma (cancer of the lymph nodes and lymphocytic white blood cells). Other types of cancers can also occur in ferrets; any lump or bump should immediately be examined by your veterinarian. Treated early, many types of cancers can be successfully managed.

Heart disease in ferrets: Cardiac or heart disease is relatively common in ferrets. Ferrets can develop congestive heart failure due to cardiomyopathy (improper function of the heart muscle), usually when they are over 3 years old. They can also develop heart failure from an infection of the heartworm parasite. Clinical signs of heart disease include weakness (in the hind end or hind legs), ataxia (wobbliness or loss of full coordination of the body), anorexia (not eating), weakness, dyspnea (trouble breathing), coughing, or abdominal distension. Your veterinarian may hear a heart murmur or detect changes to the rhythm of the heart. Diagnosis is based on a thorough history, physical examination, blood tests, X-rays, and an ECG.

How can I tell if my ferret is sick?

Signs of disease in ferrets may be specific for a certain disease.

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Most commonly, however, signs are vague and non-specific, such as a ferret with anorexia (lack of appetite) and lethargy, which can be seen with many diseases including intestinal foreign bodies, various causes of diarrhea, and many types of cancer. **ANY** deviation from normal should be a cause for concern and should be immediately evaluated by your veterinarian.

How are ferret diseases treated?

The treatment for diarrhea depends upon its cause. Intestinal parasites are treated with the appropriate deworming medication. Infectious causes of diarrhea in ferrets are treated with antibiotics and occasionally anti-ulcer medication. Owners should avoid home treatment without a proper diagnosis, as many diseases have similar symptoms and mimic each other.

Intestinal foreign bodies usually require immediate surgical removal. Since signs of foreign body ingestion are very similar to those of other diseases (such as parasites and infectious causes of diarrhea), early diagnosis and aggressive surgical intervention is important.

The various cancers commonly seen in ferrets can be treated surgically, medically, or with a combination of both surgical removal of the tumor and medical chemotherapy depending upon the type of cancer involved. Many cancers in ferrets can be treated, but early diagnosis is essential. Insulinomas are often treated with surgery and/or medical therapy. While treatment can help control signs and improve the quality of life, insulinoma is not usually considered a type of cancer that can be cured. Adrenal tumors may be surgically removed and are also generally treated medically, as well. Adrenal tumors should always be treated, as the hormones produced by the tumor can enlarge the prostate in male ferrets, leading to life-threatening urinary tract obstruction in male ferret and to bone marrow suppression and anemia in both males and females. Treatment course should be discussed with your veterinarian.

Most heart conditions in ferrets cannot be cured, but the appropriate treatment will help the heart work better and improve the ferret's quality of life.

All health problems should be brought to the attention of your veterinarian as soon as possible, so that assessment, diagnostic testing and specific treatment can be performed. It may be necessary to hospitalize your ferret for supportive or intensive care, which can include specific medications, fluid therapy and force-feeding.

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