

# When They are Very Young



## **Vaccinations**

Kits (young ferrets) should be vaccinated for distemper at 8,\* 12 and 16 weeks of age then at one year of age. Reactions to the licenced distemper vaccine are common.

Discuss the benefits and risks of vaccination and observe your ferret in the veterinarian's office for at least 20 minutes follow distemper vaccines given to ferrets over one year of age. Rabies vaccination should be given at 16 weeks and then annually.

## Spay / Castration

We recommend spaying or castration at 6 months of age. This allows kits to develop their normal sexually influenced size and body characteristics.\*

## Descenting

The purpose of "descenting," or removing the anal sacs, from a ferret is to keep them from "spraying" or "skunking," that is spraying the contents of their anal

sacs when frightened or excited. This procedure is unnecessary for most ferrets and should be reserved for those ferret that have proven to be a problem.\*

\*The great majority of ferrets we see today are from large farm operations (such as Marshall Farms). These kits have been spayed, castrated, descented, and have had a single distemper vaccination at 5 ½ to 6 ½ weeks of age. Because they are so young at the time they are vaccinated these ferrets still require the same number of vaccinations as other ferrets.

## Annual examination and vaccination

It is very important to have your ferret examined on an annual basis. The importance increases with age. The majority of ferret diseases are treatable when detected early. Rabies vaccinations are repeated annually. We are working with laboratories to provide a test for the level of protection a ferret may have for distemper. If and when this test is available we may recommend that your ferret be tested and vaccinated only if it's level of immunity is low. If you chose not to vaccinate your ferret for distemper after it is one year of age, do not neglect the annual examination.

## Diet

Ferrets are consummate carnivores and require a diet high in animal source proteins and high in fats. We recommend that one of the following diets be fed: Mazuri (Purina Mills) Ferret formula, Totally Ferret, Bandit Brand (Marshall Farms) Ferret food, Sheppard and Green ferret food, Science Diet Kitten formula, or Iams Kitten formula. Many of the lesser brands are inadequate or have a poor level of acceptance. Grocery store cat and kitten foods most often contain too little animal source proteins and or fats.

## Supplements

Nutritional supplements such as Linatone, Ferritone, Fer-vite are well accepted and may be offered as occasional treats, rewards, or diversions from noxious experiences (such as nail trimming). No other dietary supplement is necessary or recommended. A variety of items may be used as treats or rewards for training,

bribes or for good behavior. Many ferrets enjoy raisins. They may be fed as treats or rewards in limited numbers.

## Caging

Most ferret owners chose to cage their friends during the hours that they are not home or awake to supervise their activities. A large all metal cage is recommended. They are easier to clean and deodorize than wooden cages. Multiple levels should be connected by long sloping ramps (steep ramps are dangerous, especially for older ferrets) or tubes. The cage should be easy to clean with easy access to all levels and removable shelves and floors. Food bowls should be heavy crocks or should be attached to the side of the cage. Water is most often supplied via a water bottle with a screw on lid (don't use bottles with rubber stoppers as ferrets will chew and swallow the rubber).

## Litter box / Litter

The litter box can be a source of medical problems as well as training frustrations. Clay kitty litter or clumping litter have proven to be a problem as they can cause upper respiratory irritation (dust), dry dirty coat (they roll in it), and airway obstructions (gets in nose and mouth). Corncob bedding is not recommended as it harbors mold, is not digestible and can be a source of intestinal impaction if swallowed. Pine and cedar shavings contain volatile pine oils and turpentine that cause upper respiratory irritation and have been shown to cause liver enzyme elevation and can cause respiratory tract and skin irritation in the human household members.

We recommend the use of paper bedding products. These products are absorbent, and inhibit bacterial growth. A few brand names are Care Fresh, Yesterday's News and there are many more.

# Care of the Older Ferret

Ferrets have an average life span of 5 to 7 years. Some "record breakers" may live as long as 10 years. Ferrets start to experience middle age problems as early as 3 years of age. With a good "geriatric program," we have been able to prolong the quality and quantity of life in many pets.

More frequent checkups, every 6 months, are recommended for older ferrets. Ferrets develop disease rapidly, especially cancer, kidney and heart disease, and waiting an entire year between visits could prevent the early detection and management of these diseases. Starting at four years of age we recommend laboratory work be done. On a healthy animal a complete blood cell count and a fasting blood glucose as the minimum work-up. The pet should be fasted 2 to 3 hours prior to the blood tests being taken. This routine laboratory work should be done once a year. Additional laboratory work, a blood chemistry profile, and an x-ray, particularly if your pet is exhibiting signs of illness, may be recommended. Anesthesia may be necessary for the x-ray. We use isoflurane gas anesthesia on our ferret patients which is very safe and eliminates the stress the pet may feel with these procedures.

After the age of 7, diagnostic testing may have to be done every 6 months along with the bi-annual examination. These laboratory work-ups have been invaluable in detecting many disease early and thus facilitating early treatment.